Dweller in the Dark

Jan Lavrinovski

All rights reserved

Contents

In the Depths.....1

The Lair.....10

An Ancient Find.....21

Above.....51

Transformation.....92

The Presence.....120

In the Depths

The air is thick with the scent of rot and damp stone. Water drips from the jagged ceiling, each droplet echoing through the vast, unseen tunnels beyond. A shape stirs in the blackness, shifting with slow, deliberate movements. It does not stand, for it has long abandoned the habits of surface-dwellers. It moves on all fours, its pale, slick skin glistening in the faintest trace of moisture.

It is old. Older than the walls that confine it. Older than the crumbling bones of those who dared venture into its domain.

Huge, lidless eyes gleam in the darkness, peering through a world devoid of light. It does not need the sun. The deep has given it sight beyond sight, a vision honed through endless eons of crawling through the tunnels that weave like veins beneath the world above.

It sniffs, nostrils flaring, taking in the scents carried on unseen currents. Something moves far ahead. A whisper of flesh and breath, a heartbeat thrumming against the walls.

A rasping murmur escapes its throat, a string of words woven from a dialect of goblinish long since forgotten by the tribes that scurry above. Words of the depths, of stone and water, of hunger eternal. Words that few, if any, would understand.

The creature moves. Clawed fingers scrape against the stone, propelling its sinewy frame forward. The cave is its world, its cradle, its tomb. It has seen civilizations rise and fall, has watched as the foolish carved too deeply, has fed upon the lost and the doomed.

It stops. Listens. The tunnels shift with distant echoes. Its meal is close. It whispers again, an ancient chant of the deep, a prayer to nothing, a lament to everything.

Then it moves once more, deeper into the black, crawling ever forward into the bowels of the world, where light will never reach.

Nibluk pressed his belly to the cold stone, his long fingers splayed across the damp floor. The tunnel stretched before him, an abyss of shadows. His breath was silent, his pulse steady, his great empty eyes locked onto the creature in the gloom ahead.

A spider. A great, bloated thing, its thick legs clicking against the stone as it spun its web. Its abdomen was streaked with pale, sickly markings, and its mandibles twitched with patient diligence as it worked its silk into a sprawling trap.

Nibluk watched.

He did not move.

The spider finished its task and scuttled into a side tunnel, vanishing into the dark. Nibluk crept forward, his fingertips trailing along the strands of the web. They trembled, whispering

across the stone. His nose wrinkled as he sniffed, his hunger gnawing at him like a starving worm in his gut.

Then, treasure—a half-rotten cave rat, limp in the silk. The bones of other things clung to the strands, dried husks of lesser creatures who had failed to escape. Nibluk plucked the rat free, his elongated fingers tearing it loose from the cocoon of silk. He tilted his head back and let the thing slide down his throat in a single, wet gulp.

Still hungry. Always hungry.

His fingers searched further, clawing at the wall where patches of pale fungi sprouted in soft, pulsing clumps. He tore the mushrooms loose, stuffing them into his maw, savoring the bitter, earthy taste. As he ate, his hand drifted, brushing the web again.

The strands trembled.

A whisper in the dark.

Then—movement.

A clicking sound.

Nibluk froze, his body coiled like a spring.

The spider came fast, too fast. A blur of legs, a nightmare of chitin and fangs. It vaulted from the shadows, launching itself toward him with a terrible, alien screech.

Nibluk snarled, rolling to the side as the beast crashed onto the stone. Silk sprayed from its spinnerets in frantic bursts, anchoring its descent. Its legs scrabbled, turning with unnatural speed. Then it leaped again.

Nibluk did not move. He let it come.

The moment its legs touched him, he struck.

His jaws unhinged, snapping onto the spider's leg. He bit down, teeth sinking into the hard exoskeleton. A muffled crunch—then the salty, foul taste of ichor flooded his tongue. The spider screeched, its body twisting violently.

It bit back.

Fangs plunged into Nibluk's shoulder, their tips digging deep. Venom pumped into his flesh, but the creature of the deep did not flinch. He had long since lost the ability to fear poison, his ancient body warped by the dark, resistant to the death that should have taken him ages ago.

He hissed, spitting thick strings of the spider's blood. His arms locked around its midsection, long fingers wrapping tight around its pulsing thorax. He squeezed.

The spider thrashed, legs hammering at the stone, but Nibluk did not let go. He forced its head to the side, his grip crushing the life from it.

Its fangs snapped, but he had already twisted.

A leg came free, torn from its socket. Ichor sprayed across the stone in thick, clotted streams. The beast let out a shrill, gurgling cry. Its remaining legs flailed, slashing against Nibluk's flesh, but his grip only tightened.

One more twist.

A sickening pop.

The spider's head tore free, strands of sinew stretching and snapping in the darkness. Its body twitched, convulsing, its legs curling inward in the death-throes of its kind.

Then—silence.

Nibluk panted, his face dripping with ichor. He blinked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Then he smiled.

He fell upon the corpse with ravenous delight, his fingers prying the legs free one by one. He cracked them open like shells, sucking the meat from inside. The taste was bitter, but it filled the void.

He feasted.

And then, when the last of the spider was stripped of flesh, he crawled forward into the dark, licking the last drops of ichor from his fingers.

The deep was silent.

Nibluk moved through the dark, his body low to the stone, fingers splayed wide to feel the grooves in the ancient rock. His pale, glistening skin rippled as he crawled, his elongated limbs folding and unfolding like a thing never meant to stand upright. He was a creature of the depths, molded by endless time, shaped by hunger and shadow.

The air was thick with dampness, the scent of fungus and decay pressing into his nostrils. He sniffed deeply, filling his lungs with the cold breath of the deep.

"Turg-sshak mur'toth... burruk zar-dur... agh relth'shur…"

(Stone speaks slow... whispers long... but it remembers.)

His voice slithered out in a rasping mix of goblin and the broken echoes of forgotten tongues. There were hints of human words, stolen from the lost and the dead, twisted by his ruined lips into something neither mortal nor monstrous.

"They come, they take, they burn..." he muttered. *"Steel hands, black hearts, hungry for gold... always gold."*

The words oozed with hatred.

He paused, lapping at a puddle of stale water collected in a dip in the stone. His lips curled back as he drank, his tongue flicking out to catch a bloated cave-mite that squirmed too close. It popped between his teeth.

Further. Deeper. The tunnels tightened, twisting like the innards of a great beast. He moved like something boneless, his limbs contorting as he pulled himself through a narrow gap. His nails scraped softly against the rock.

At times he leapt, bounding between crags like a spindly insect. Other times he climbed, his fingers gripping cracks in the stone, his body twisting and shifting through tunnels too small for anything that walked on two legs.

Nibluk *crawled*.

And he listened.

The tunnels carried sound, though most of it was silence. A far-off drip. The chitter of distant things scuttling in the black. The creak of unseen depths shifting, as if the world itself were stretching in sleep.

Then, his lair.

A small hollow, nestled in the side of a deeper tunnel. He squeezed inside, curling into the space like a nesting animal.

His collection lay before him, a hoard of things stolen, scavenged, plucked from the forgotten corners of the dark. A few tarnished goblets, their once-fine craftsmanship dulled by time and damp. Necklaces, their chains twisted and tangled together. A single silver ring, too small for his gnarled fingers.

And junk.

Rusted mugs. A handful of dented pots. A few broken knives. A cracked dwarven helmet, its sigil long faded. And in the center, resting against the cold stone, a skull—yellowed, worn smooth by Nibluk's clawed fingers. A duergar.

He hissed at the sight of it, his lips curling back, his teeth clicking together in a slow, rhythmic chitter.

"Zhur'akh dur…" he rasped.

(Stone-born vermin.)

The duergar. Filthy things. Digging, mining, stealing the deep as if they owned it. Hammering with their wretched tools, tearing the stone apart, taking *his* darkness and making it *theirs.*

"They dig, they scratch, they take what is not theirs." His voice was barely more than a breath. *"They think the deep is theirs. It is not. It belongs to the dark."*

He touched the skull, tracing the curve of the bone. He remembered when he had found it, long ago, its former owner already half-rotted, his corpse picked clean by the things that lurked unseen.

A slow, wet gurgle of satisfaction rumbled from his throat.

One less duergar.

But not enough.

Never enough.

The deep was old. Older than the dwarves, older than men, older than even Nibluk himself. It had no lords, no kings, no masters. The darkness had been here before them, and it would remain long after they had turned to dust.

"They think they rule." His fingers curled around the silver ring, gripping it tightly. *"But the deep does not forget."*

He let out a slow breath, his limbs folding beneath him. He curled against the cold rock, his fingers still resting on his treasures. The deep whispered around him, a slow song in a voice only he could hear.

And Nibluk listened.

Waiting.

The tunnels stretched before him, endless veins carved through the flesh of the earth. Nibluk slithered forward, his belly brushing the cold stone, his fingers feeling every crack, every groove, every memory buried in the rock.

The deep whispered.

It whispered of things long dead. Of bones crushed beneath shifting stone. Of creatures that came and went, breathing and bleeding, their lives nothing more than echoes swallowed by time.

He crawled.

For hours, he moved, his limbs folding and stretching, his body twisting through narrow passages, his tongue flicking at the air. The scent of damp rock. Mold. Metal.

And then—

Something else.

A sound.

Soft. Rhythmic. A faint scraping against stone.

Nibluk froze, pressing himself flat against the tunnel floor. His great, empty eyes blinked once, twice. Then he moved, slower now, each motion precise, measured.

He crept closer.

Through a narrow crack in the rock, he saw it.

A goblin.

The creature stood hunched, its bony fingers scraping at the tunnel wall, picking at something buried in the stone. A dull, rusted pick lay at its feet, discarded as it pried with its nails.

A scavenger.

A thief.

"Filthy goblinses…" Nibluk whispered, his voice no more than a breath. His lips curled back, revealing jagged, yellowed teeth. His fingers flexed against the stone.

"Must take his breath."

He moved.

The goblin did not hear him. Did not see the slick, crawling thing emerging from the dark behind him.

Then Nibluk struck.

He leaped onto the goblin's back, his arms snapping around its throat like a noose. The goblin let out a strangled yelp, its body jerking forward, its fingers clawing at its own neck.

It thrashed.

It cursed, spitting and snarling, its hands fumbling for the dagger at its waist. But Nibluk clung to it, his grip unrelenting, his fingers pressing deep into the flesh.

The goblin's breath came in ragged gasps, its chest heaving, its legs kicking wildly against the tunnel floor.

Nibluk said nothing.

He only *held on.*

The goblin floundered, its movements growing weaker, its curses turning into choked, desperate gurgles. The dagger slipped from its fingers, clattering against the rock.

Time stretched.

Two minutes.

The goblin twitched, its legs jerking in weak spasms.

Then—stillness.

A final shudder.

A final gasp.

And then nothing.

Nibluk released his grip, letting the lifeless body slump forward. His long fingers crawled over it, plucking at its belt, its pockets.

A glint.

A gold nugget, small but *his.*

A trinket—a tiny carved figurine of a rat, strung on a piece of knotted string. He held it up, tilting his head. A goblin's charm, useless and forgotten.

But now *his*.

He stuffed both into the tattered folds of cloth wrapped around his waist, then turned, slinking back into the tunnels.

The deep stretched before him once more.

He sniffed, his nostrils flaring.

He listened, his ears twitching.

And then, with silent, patient hunger, Nibluk crawled on, vanishing once more into the dark.

Nibluk moved through the tunnels like a ghost of the black. He crawled, climbed, and leaped from jagged ledge to ledge, his long fingers gripping the stone with practiced ease. At times, he would stop, his great empty eyes staring into the abyss, listening, watching. The deep had its own rhythm, its own pulse, and he could feel it.

He stopped at a shallow puddle, his nostrils flaring at the scent of fresh, cold water. His lips curled back as he bent low, dipping his face into the pool, sucking in the liquid with slow, deep gulps. It carried the taste of minerals, of damp stone, of life unseen.

"Bur'rak zhur-tach… azhkur-noth d'vorah…" he gurgled to himself.

(The deep water flows… the stone drinks slow.)

With a final slurp, he wiped his mouth on the back of his clawed hand and slithered onward.

Hours passed in darkness.

The tunnels twisted, narrow veins of rock beneath the great mountain of Dur'Agor, the fortress of the deep. He knew these paths well, the cracks and crags where the stone whispered of old things, of lost things.

Then, a sound.

A sharp, rhythmic *clang.*

Nibluk froze.

The sound of metal against stone. Again. Again.

He crept closer, each movement slow, deliberate, his body pressing low to the cold rock. The scent hit him—dirt, sweat, and the unmistakable stench of iron and earth.

A *duergar.*

The dwarf stood with his back to Nibluk, his short, stocky frame barely shifting as he swung his pickaxe in slow, steady strikes. The rock chipped away under his blows, revealing tiny veins of something hidden within. A miner, scavenging the deep for its silver bones.

Nibluk stayed in the shadows.

And he *watched.*

For hours, he did not move. He waited, silent and still, his breath barely more than a whisper against the stone. He watched the dwarf work, his mind churning with thoughts, with hunger, with *hatred.*

Then the moment came.

With slow, careful steps, he crawled from the dark, slinking toward the dwarf, his fingers twitching in anticipation.

The dwarf did not hear him.

Did not see the crawling thing emerging from the black.

Then Nibluk *leapt.*

His arms wrapped around the dwarf's thick neck, his legs locking around his waist. His fingers clamped down with iron grip, his sinewy arms squeezing with all the strength of a creature born in the dark.

The dwarf let out a strangled shout, his thick hands clawing at Nibluk's grip. His body twisted, his boots scraping against the stone as he staggered under the weight of his attacker.

But duergar were not goblins. They were not weak.

With a roar, the dwarf bent low and *threw* Nibluk over his shoulder.

Nibluk's body slammed into the cavern wall, his vision flashing white for a split second. He let out a sharp hiss, his sharp teeth clacking together as he scrambled to his feet.

The dwarf turned, his red eyes burning with rage.

"*Filthy tunnel crawler!*" the duergar bellowed, gripping his pickaxe with both hands.

Nibluk snarled and lunged.

Claws raked across the dwarf's arms, tearing at thick leather and flesh. The duergar swung wildly, his fists hammering against Nibluk's ribs, but the deep-dweller clung to him like a leech.

Then, the pain.

The pickaxe slammed into Nibluk's shoulder with a sickening crunch.

He shrieked, his body jerking, but his grip did not loosen.

Pain was nothing.

Hunger was everything.

With a guttural hiss, he *leapt again*, his mouth open wide, and this time, his teeth found flesh.

He bit deep, his jaws clamping down on the dwarf's throat, tearing, pulling.

A gurgling shriek.

A wet, choking sound.

The duergar's hands trembled, his pickaxe falling from his grip. His body swayed, blood pouring from the ruin of his throat.

Then, he crumpled.

Lifeless.

Nibluk crouched over the corpse, his lips curled in a grin, his face smeared with ichor.

A deep, satisfied gurgle rumbled in his throat as he dug through the dwarf's belt pouch, his fingers curling around a few small, jagged pieces of silver.

"Mine."

He stuffed them into his rags, his long fingers curling protectively over them.

With one last glance at the corpse, he slithered away, vanishing once more into the endless black.

The tunnels whispered.

And Nibluk listened.

The Lair

Nibluk slithered through the tunnels, his movements slow and methodical. Hours had passed, the deep stretching before him in endless black veins. His limbs ached, but his hunger drove him onward, his mind filled with whispers of stone and shadows.

Then—voices.

He froze.

Guttural, chattering speech, sharp and biting.

Goblins.

He crept forward, pressing himself against the damp rock, his large, empty eyes blinking once, twice. Ahead, the tunnel opened into a wide cavern, flickering orange light spilling from within.

A *lair.*

He saw them now—fourteen of them, clustered around a crude wooden table, their bodies hunched, their faces twisted in greedy delight. They feasted, shoving chunks of half-rotted meat into their crooked mouths, tearing flesh from bones with yellowed fangs. The air reeked of sweat, smoke, and old blood.

At the head of the table sat the *Goblin King.*

A bloated creature, larger than the rest, his flesh draped in tattered furs, a crown of rusted metal perched atop his misshapen head. His face was twisted in a permanent sneer, his bulbous nose wrinkled with disdain as he gnawed on a thick bone, bits of gristle and grease dribbling down his chin.

Nibluk was about to slip away, back into the comfort of the black, when—

A hand grabbed him.

His body jerked. Before he could react, a rough rope looped around his neck and *yanked* him forward with brutal force.

He let out a strangled hiss, his fingers clawing at the rope, his limbs kicking as he was *dragged* into the lair.

Two goblins held him, laughing, their teeth flashing in the firelight.

"Look what we got here!" one of them croaked, his voice rasping like rusted metal.

"Grrnnnm, ugly little thing, innit?" the other sneered, jabbing Nibluk's ribs with a filthy claw.

Nibluk struggled, but their grip was iron, their laughter grating and cruel. They pulled him further into the lair, past the feasting goblins, past the fire pits where charred bones lay scattered across the floor.

The Goblin King turned, his small, beady eyes narrowing.

"What in the pits of Mag'kur is this?" he spat, slamming his meaty fist on the table.

The goblins yanked Nibluk forward and *threw* him against the rough cavern wall. Before he could move, the ropes were around his wrists, his ankles—tight, biting into his flesh. He hissed, his eyes flashing with hatred.

The Goblin King stood, waddling toward him with heavy steps, his greasy face twisted in amusement.

"Hrrrnnn, look at this little shit." He leaned close, his breath hot and stinking. *"What use are you to me, eh?"*

The goblins *howled* with laughter.

One of them kicked Nibluk's ribs, sending a sharp jolt of pain through his side. Another spat at him, the warm phlegm splattering against his slick skin.

The Goblin King smirked, lifting a long, tattered whip.

"Let's see if it squeals, hmm?"

The whip *snapped.*

A sharp sting burned across Nibluk's chest. He clenched his teeth, his body tensing.

"Hnnrghhh, look at him!" the king cackled. *"Takes a lashing like a good little worm!"*

The goblins cheered, slamming their fists on the wooden table, gnawing on bones as they watched the spectacle.

The king lashed him again. And again. Thin red welts rose on Nibluk's flesh, but he made no sound, his lips curling into a silent snarl.

The king paused, breathing heavily, his grin wide and jagged.

"Bah!" He tossed the whip aside. *"What use is this filthy thing to us?"* He turned to his goblins, raising his arms. *"I wonder… would it make for good soup?"*

The goblins erupted into laughter.

"Gut it!" one shouted.

"Chop its legs off first!" another sneered.

"I wanna eat its eyes!"

"Nah, throw it to the worgs!"

Nibluk sat still, his eyes low, his breath slow. His body ached, but his mind burned with something deeper.

Hate.

He would not die in this pit of filth.

No.

He *would* crawl again.

He *would* listen to the whispers of the deep.

Nibluk sat slumped against the cavern wall, his arms bound above his head, his legs tied together at the ankles. The rough rope bit into his flesh, but he did not struggle. Not yet. His empty black eyes stared from the gloom, watching, waiting.

The goblins had returned to their feast.

Their chattering filled the lair, a ceaseless cacophony of slurps, snarls, and laughter. They tore at hunks of charred meat, grease dripping down their chins as they chewed with open mouths. A few tossed bones at each other, cackling when one was pelted in the face.

The Goblin King slumped on his crude wooden throne, gnawing at a fat slab of meat, his thick fingers coated in filth.

"Hrrnkk, tomorrow we see what it's good for," he muttered, spitting a chunk of gristle to the ground. *"Might gut it, might let it rot. Maybe the worgs need feeding."*

A goblin to his left, a wiry thing with one ear missing, cackled and leaned in.

"What if we chop it up slow, hmm? Bet we could sell bits of it to the little ones for sport."

"Hrrmm." The king chewed thoughtfully. *"Might be fun. Might be too much effort. Eh, we'll see."*

Nibluk remained still.

Waiting.

The goblin lair was a festering pit of chaos.

Goblins argued, screamed, and struck each other over scraps of food. A fire pit burned in the center of the cavern, its flames weak and sputtering, throwing jagged shadows against the damp walls.

The scent of rot and filth clung to the air. The floor was strewn with bones, some licked clean, others still crawling with flies. Dark tunnels stretched beyond the lair, their depths unknown, twisting away into blackness.

A group of smaller goblins—whelps, barely grown—scuttled near the fire, playing some crude game with a severed rat head, kicking it back and forth while yipping in excitement.

Nearby, an elder goblin sat hunched over a low wooden table, sharpening a jagged blade with slow, deliberate strokes. His eyes flicked toward Nibluk now and then, his lips curling into a toothless sneer.

Two goblin warriors, clad in rusted bits of armor, stood guard at the lair's entrance, their spears resting lazily at their sides.

Nibluk watched them all.

He had seen goblins before. But not like this.

He had seen them scurrying in the deep, slinking through the tunnels like vermin. But here, in their lair, they were *something else.*

This was not a gang of scavengers.

This was a *tribe.*

And he was in their grasp.

The first hours of the night were restless.

The goblins came to inspect their catch, poking at him with sticks, cackling at his silent glares.

One goblin, a hunched, one-eyed creature with yellowed teeth, scuttled close and ran a long, filthy nail down Nibluk's arm.

"Slimy thing," he hissed.

Another one, missing half its nose, snorted. *"Maybe it ain't got no blood, just muck in its belly."*

The one-eyed goblin grinned. *"Let's see."*

He reached to his belt and pulled out a crude dagger, the blade chipped and stained. With slow delight, he pressed it against Nibluk's arm and *dragged* it across the skin.

A thin red line opened.

Nibluk made no sound.

The goblins laughed.

"It bleeds!"

"Hhhrrnn! Maybe we cut out its tongue next!"

Another goblin, younger and eager, leaned in and *spat* on Nibluk's face. The warm, putrid glob dribbled down his cheek.

Still, he did not react.

He only *watched.*

The goblins grew bored after a while. One of them gave him a half-hearted kick, then scurried off to rejoin the feast.

Hours passed.

More goblins came, some simply to stare, others to mock, a few to inflict petty cruelties. One smeared a chunk of rotten meat against his lips. Another poured a mug of soured ale over his head.

They all laughed.

And Nibluk *remembered.*

At some point in the night, the Goblin King himself wobbled over, his gut swaying as he clutched a half-empty jug of fermented mushroom brew. His beady eyes gleamed with drunken mischief.

He leaned in, his breath rancid.

"Hrrrrh, you still alive, little wretch?" he slurred.

Nibluk's black eyes stared. Unblinking.

The king grinned. *"Maybe we make you a pet, eh?"* He reached down, grabbed Nibluk's jaw, and *shook* it roughly.

"Maybe we tie you up, let the whelps throw rocks at you, yeh?" He let out a hacking laugh. *"Maybe we teach you tricks. Sit! Beg! Hhrrrrnkkh! The Goblin King's little freak!"*

The gathered goblins howled with laughter.

The king straightened, wiping his mouth. He raised a hand, and one of the guards placed a long, twisted knife in his palm.

"Or maybe we just cut you up now and save the trouble, eh?"

The knife hovered near Nibluk's throat.

The deep-dweller said nothing.

He only waited.

The Goblin King stared at him for a long moment. His lip curled.

"Bah. No fun."

He tossed the knife aside, turned, and waddled back to his throne.

The goblins cheered, throwing scraps of meat at Nibluk before returning to their revelry.

After a few weeks, one night the fire burned low. The goblins grew sluggish.

One by one, they slumped into sleep, curling up in nests of rags and filth. The Goblin King himself collapsed onto his throne, snoring loudly, his crown tilting on his bloated head.

The guards at the entrance sat with their spears resting in their laps, their heads bobbing as sleep threatened to overtake them.

The lair was silent.

And Nibluk *began to move.*

Slowly. Carefully.

His jaw opened, his sharp teeth sinking into the rope around his wrists. He bit down, gnawed, felt the fibers weaken. His jaws worked in slow, patient motions, his body deathly still.

Minutes passed.

Then—

A snap.

The rope loosened.

His hands fell free.

Nibluk did not move immediately. He let the numbness fade from his limbs, let the sensation return. Then, with slow, deliberate movements, he reached down and began working at the bindings on his ankles.

The goblins slept.

The fire crackled low.

And the deep whispered.

"Crawl, Nibluk. Crawl and take your breath back."

With one last bite, the final rope came free. He did not hesitate. He moved.

Nibluk moved like a shadow, slithering across the cavern floor, his steps light as dust settling on stone. The goblins lay sprawled in tangled heaps, their bellies full, their minds dulled by drink and feasting. Their snores echoed through the lair, a chorus of ragged wheezes and guttural grunts.

He stopped beside one of them—a smaller goblin, curled in a nest of filthy rags, its breath slow and steady.

A dagger lay at its side.

Nibluk's long fingers reached forward, careful, patient. He plucked the weapon from the goblin's grasp, curling his claws around the handle. The metal was rough, its edge chipped, but it was *his* now.

He turned, his black eyes flicking to the long wooden table where the remnants of the feast lay scattered. Bones, half-gnawed. A greasy slab of meat, torn but uneaten.

His nostrils flared.

Food was food.

With slow, deliberate movements, he tore a chunk free with his sharp teeth, gnawing as he crouched in the shadows. The taste was rank, the meat cold and tough, but he swallowed it down. His body needed it.

His strength would return.

His vengeance would come.

He slithered toward the tunnel's edge, slipping past the slumped bodies of the goblin guards. Their spears rested against the rock, their hands loose, their heads bobbing in half-sleep.

One of them shifted.

Nibluk froze.

A long breath. A muttered snore.

Then stillness.

He crept past them, inch by inch, his bare feet barely brushing the stone. One more step. Another.

Then—

Darkness.

Cool, endless, familiar.

The tunnels swallowed him whole, and he did not look back.

"Never again," he whispered to himself. *"Filthy, filthy goblins… never again."*

He wandered for hours, deeper and deeper into the black veins of the mountain, through tunnels where the air was thick with silence.

He stopped in a small cavern, lit only by a single cluster of glowing mushrooms clinging to the wall. Their pale, ghostly light shimmered against the damp stone, throwing strange shapes against the ceiling.

Nibluk sat, his body folding in on itself, his long fingers gripping the stolen dagger.

He turned it slowly, watching the light dance along its jagged edge, watching how the reflection twisted across the ceiling. He tilted it back and forth, hypnotized by the glint of metal in the deep.

It was good.

A sharp thing. A *taking* thing.

He lifted it, thrusting it into the air with a slow, deliberate motion.

Then again.

A quiet stab. A second. A third.

His mind filled with images—of soft throats, of sunken bellies, of warm, spilling blood.

He *could* use this.

No more strangling. No more waiting.

This was quicker.

This was *better.*

Then the rage came.

Nibluk *snarled* and slashed wildly at the air, his limbs jerking with violent energy. He tore at the blackness around him, his body twisting as he hacked and stabbed at unseen enemies.

"Filthy, filthy goblins!" he hissed through clenched teeth.

A slash. A thrust.

"Cowards! Thieves!"

Another cut through the empty space.

"Whipping me! Spitting on me! Licking their greasy fingers while I rot!"

His breath came in ragged gasps, his fingers tight around the dagger's hilt. His arms trembled, his body shaking from the force of his own fury.

He stopped.

The cavern was silent again.

He let out a long, slow breath, his shoulders rolling, his muscles unwinding. His fingers loosened, just slightly, still gripping the dagger.

No.

Not tonight.

Tonight, he would rest.

He climbed.

There, near the ceiling, was a ledge of jagged stone, safe from the floor below. He pulled himself up, his body moving with practiced ease, curling onto the cold rock like a nesting beast.

His fingers still held the dagger, tucked close to his chest.

His breath slowed. His rage faded. Sleep came.

Nibluk stirred, his black eyes fluttering open to the abyss. The deep had no sunrise, no dawn, no warmth. Only the endless dark. He uncurled his wiry limbs and stretched, his slick skin glistening faintly under the pale glow of distant fungi. His fingers curled tightly around the stolen dagger, never letting go, even in sleep.

With slow, deliberate movements, he slithered down from the rock ledge, gripping the jagged surface with clawed fingers. The stone was cold beneath him, comforting in its unyielding presence.

Then, without a sound, he *vanished* into the tunnels.

Deeper he went, moving like a whisper through the veins of the mountain. The tunnels shifted around him, old paths twisting into unknown places. He moved for a long while, letting the hunger guide him.

Then, he smelled it.

Water.

He emerged into a small cavern where a dark pool rested in a basin of smooth stone. A thin waterfall trickled down from an unseen crevice, feeding the pool with a slow, rhythmic flow. The air was colder here, the scent of damp rock filling his nostrils.

Nibluk crouched at the edge, peering into the black water.

Shapes moved beneath the surface—eel-like creatures, their slick bodies writhing in slow, lazy circles.

His fingers shot forward.

A splash—then his claws curled around a squirming fish, its flesh cold and wet. He *gulped* it down whole, its body wriggling once before disappearing into his maw.

Another.

And another.

The hunger in his belly dulled, satisfaction washing over him like the cold water itself.

He caught more, tearing into them with jagged teeth, feeling the thick slime coat his tongue. The meal was fresh, and the deep had provided.

When he was full, he wiped his mouth with the back of his arm and turned, slipping into the tunnels once more.

He had work to do.

Nibluk climbed again, this time pulling himself onto a narrow stone ledge high near the ceiling of the tunnel. He curled his long limbs beneath him, his fingers tightening around the dagger.

And he *waited.*

The silence stretched.

The deep pulsed around him, the breathing of the earth itself slow and steady. Hours passed.

Then—

A sound.

A faint, cheerful *whistling.*

Nibluk's empty eyes snapped open.

Down the tunnel, a lone goblin walked, his uneven steps echoing softly against the stone. His lips pursed, his tuneless whistling bouncing off the walls as he strolled, unaware, unworried.

Nibluk grinned.

As the goblin passed beneath the ledge, Nibluk *leapt.*

The creature barely had time to gasp before the dagger plunged into his gut.

A wet, *sickening* squelch.

The goblin's body jolted, his hands flying up in shock, but before he could scream, Nibluk's teeth *sank* into his shoulder, ripping at flesh.

The goblin flailed, his breath coming in short, panicked gasps. A weak, dying noise gurgled from his throat as Nibluk's blade stabbed again—*and again*—each thrust tearing into soft, yielding flesh.

His limbs twitched.

His voice choked out into silence.

His body *went still.*

But Nibluk did not stop.

His dagger kept moving, jabbing, slicing, twisting—practicing, perfecting. *Feeling* the way the blade worked, how it *entered*, how it *took*, how it *ended*.

The goblin was nothing but meat now.

A lesson to learn from.

When at last he stopped, he sat crouched over the body, his chest rising and falling with slow, deep breaths. Blood dripped from his fingers, from his teeth, from the dagger clutched tightly in his hand.

He licked his lips.

Then he whispered.

"Goblinses… spitting at me…" He ran a claw along the goblin's open throat. *"Goblinses… cursing at me…"*

He leaned in close, pressing his lips near the lifeless ear.

"Goblinses… wanting to make food of me…"

He grinned, his jagged teeth flashing in the dim glow of the mushrooms.

"Here is your food, filthy goblins."

A deep, satisfied *gurgle* rumbled in his throat. Nibluk stood, the dagger still in his grasp. And without a sound, he disappeared once more into the tunnels. The deep had whispered, and he had *answered.*

Nibluk moved through the endless black, deeper and deeper into the tunnels, the dagger still warm with goblin blood in his grip. His hunger was quiet now, his rage satisfied—for a time. But he *could not stop*.

There was more to see. More to take. More to *kill.*

The deep whispered to him, and he listened.

Days passed. Or maybe longer.

Time had no meaning in the dark.

An Ancient Find

Nibluk *crawled*, his limbs folding and unfolding as he slithered through the narrow tunnels, places where no goblin or dwarf could fit. He drank from unseen trickles of water, gnawed on blind fish he caught in underground streams. He was part of the deep now, a thing that moved and breathed where no others dared.

Then he found something *old.*

The tunnel opened into a vast cavern, the air thick with the scent of dust, metal, and long-dead things. Stalactites loomed from the ceiling like jagged teeth, and the walls were carved —not by nature, but by *hands.*

Stone steps led downward into a chamber of strange shapes, half-collapsed ruins covered in centuries of grime. Strange, skeletal remains littered the floor, their bones twisted and *wrong*, as if they had died screaming.

In the center of it all stood a door.

Massive. Black as night.

It was set into the rock itself, a thing untouched by time. No keyhole, no handle—only symbols, carved deep into its surface. Words that meant nothing, but pulled at something in his mind.

He stepped closer. His fingers reached out. Then—a sound. A scraping. A shifting of stone.

Something else was here. Something watching. Nibluk did not move. He listened.

The sound was slow, deliberate—like something dragging itself across the cavern floor.

His grip tightened on the dagger.

A shape emerged from the black.

It was tall—twice his height, its body wrapped in ancient, tattered cloth that clung to it like the remnants of a burial shroud. Its face was hidden beneath a cracked, elongated mask of stone, its surface carved with the same symbols as the door.

It did not breathe.

It did not speak.

It only stood, watching him with empty hollows where eyes should be.

Nibluk crouched low, his lips pulling back in a silent snarl. He had killed before. He would kill again.

But something about this thing—this silent thing—made the deep in his chest coil tight.

It raised one arm, long and thin, its fingers curling as if beckoning him forward.

And then, in a voice like shifting stone, it *spoke.*

"You do not belong here."

Nibluk did not answer.

His fingers flexed around the dagger, his black eyes locked on the thing.

It did not move closer. It only watched.

"Leave," it said again. *"The door is not for you."*

Nibluk's breathing was slow, measured. He could feel it—the pull of the door. The symbols. The whispers of the deep.

Something waited beyond it. Something older than the tunnels. He could leave. Or he could find out.

His lips curled into a grin. He took a step forward. And the thing in the dark raised its hand. The air shuddered. The cavern walls groaned. And Nibluk charged.

Nibluk halted his charge, his feet skidding slightly on the dust-covered stone. His body was coiled like a predator ready to strike, but something in the air made him hesitate. The weight of the deep pressed around him, thick and heavy, humming with old things.

This thing—this masked creature—was no goblin, no dwarf. It was something *else.*

And the door…

The door *called* to him.

He lowered his dagger but did not sheath it. His long fingers twitched as he straightened slightly, his black eyes locked onto the empty sockets of the thing's mask.

"Nurrak zhur… mutach agh burun'kai?" he rasped in his deep-twisted goblin tongue.

(What lies beyond… and why do you guard it?)

The creature did not move for a long moment.

Then, in that same voice of stone shifting beneath the earth, it answered.

"The door is not for the crawling things. Not for those that slither and scrape and hunger in the dark."

Nibluk's lips curled, showing jagged teeth.

"I am of the deep," he muttered, his voice like a hiss of wet stone. *"I have crawled where no feet have walked. I have tasted what the deep has given. I have stolen breath. The dark is mine."*

The masked figure tilted its head, slow, deliberate. The silence stretched.

Then it spoke again.

"Then why do you ask?"

Nibluk bared his teeth.

"Because the door calls to me."

The figure was still for a long time.

Then, slowly, it lowered its hand.

"Then listen."

The air grew colder.

The cavern trembled with something *unspoken*, something that slithered between the cracks of time.

The masked figure moved, its tattered wrappings shifting with slow, weightless motion, as if it were barely touching the ground. It raised its long fingers, and the symbols on the door began to glow.

Faint. Pale. A light not of fire or magic, but something older.

"This is not a door to a place," the figure murmured. *"It is a door to a hunger."*

Nibluk's fingers tightened around his dagger.

"What hunger?"

"The kind that waits."

A long pause.

"The kind that listens."

Nibluk stared at the markings. The shapes twisted, as if writhing beneath his gaze.

"Who built it?"

"No one. It has always been here."

His empty black eyes flicked back to the figure.

"Then why guard it?"

The masked thing tilted its head again.

"Because something must."

Nibluk exhaled slowly, his breath misting slightly in the unnatural chill. The hunger in his belly was gone now, replaced by a new craving.

Knowledge. Power. He wanted to know.

"How do I open it?" he rasped.

The figure did not move. Then, slowly, it reached up and removed its mask. What lay beneath was *not a face.* Not a skull. Not flesh. Just void.

A hollow, gaping emptiness, darker than even the tunnels, stretching back into something without end.

And then— It spoke without sound.

Nibluk *felt* the words more than he heard them. They slithered into his mind, pressing against the deepest parts of his being, where words were nothing and hunger was everything.

The symbols on the door burned into his vision, searing themselves into his memory. And then—darkness.

Nibluk staggered back, his breath ragged, his dagger clattering to the stone. His head throbbed, his skin tingling with something unseen.

The figure was gone. The cavern was silent once more. But he was not the same.

The symbols… He understood them now. Not all of them. Not yet.

But he knew one thing. The door could be opened. And one day, he *would return.* For now, he turned, gripping his dagger, and slithered back into the tunnels.

The deep had whispered its secrets. And Nibluk was *listening.*

Nibluk crawled.

The tunnels had not changed, but *he* had.

The door's symbols still burned in his mind, shifting like pale ghosts when he closed his eyes. He did not know what they meant—not yet—but they were *his* now, carved into him, part of his marrow.

His skin tingled. His fingers twitched. The deep felt different.

The whispers that had always lurked in the black corners of his mind were louder now, more *urgent.*

And something new had joined them.

Not a voice. Not a presence.

A *pull.*

Like the tunnels were no longer his to wander freely. Like they were leading him somewhere.

Guiding him. Calling him. He did not resist. Time passed.

How long? He did not know.

Hunger returned, but he ignored it. The deep was speaking to him in ways it never had before, and he would *listen.*

He crawled, deeper and deeper, until the tunnels changed.

The walls here were smoother, unnatural, *touched.*

Something had been here before him.

Then, a sound.

A faint, clicking noise, just ahead.

Nibluk froze, his black eyes narrowing.

He moved silently, pressing himself low to the stone. He slithered forward until the tunnel opened into another cavern, dimly lit by patches of pale fungus.

Shapes moved within.

Blind things.

Tall, with slick gray skin, featureless faces, and long, clawed hands that twitched and scraped at the stone. Their heads jerked with sharp, unnatural movements, as if listening without ears.

They do not see.

But they felt. Nibluk did not breathe.

One of them stopped. It turned, tilting its head, its blank face staring directly toward the tunnel where he hid. Then, in a voice without a mouth, it *spoke.*

"You have been marked."

The cavern grew colder. Nibluk's grip on his dagger tightened. He did not move. He did not speak.

The other creatures stopped, their heads tilting in unison, their clawed fingers curling toward him.

"He carries the whispers."

"Not of us."

"Not of them."

"A new thing."

One of them stepped forward.

Nibluk hissed, raising his dagger, his limbs tensing to lunge—

"No need for that, thing of the tunnels."

The voice did not come from their throats, did not echo as it should have. It was inside him.

Pressing against his skull.

"We do not kill what is not yet understood."

The blind thing stopped just a few feet away. Its head twitched.

"Tell us, little marked one... what has whispered to you?"

Nibluk's teeth clicked together.

He did not know. But he would find out.

And these creatures—whatever they were—might know *more* than him.

His lips pulled back in a slow, jagged grin.

"You tell me."

The blind things did not attack. They did not leave. They only watched. Nibluk did not know what he had become.

But he knew one thing. The deep was no longer his to simply crawl. It was his to understand. And that meant he could never stop listening.

Nibluk let his grip on the dagger loosen—just slightly. These creatures were not goblins, nor duergar, nor anything else he had encountered in the tunnels. They did not see, yet they knew he was here. They did not breathe, yet they spoke.

The air was thick between them, humming with something he could not name.

The blind thing closest to him tilted its head, its long fingers flexing in slow, deliberate motions.

"You have touched something ancient, little marked one."

Its voice was inside his skull again, pressing against his mind like something trying to crawl beneath his skin.

The others shifted, their bodies swaying in unison, as if listening to something he could not hear.

"A door."

"A hunger."

"A piece of the forgotten world now burned into your flesh."

Nibluk bared his teeth, his eyes darting from one creature to another.

"You speak of riddles, blind ones," he rasped. *"Say what you mean."*

The creature closest to him stepped forward again. Its limbs did not move like a goblin's, nor a man's. There was no wasted motion, no heaviness to its steps. It was as if it barely touched the ground at all.

"We are the Ka'thir," it said. *"We listen. We remember. We wait."*

Nibluk's fingers twitched. *"For what?"*

The cavern grew colder.

"For the one who would open the door."

The words settled into his bones like dead weight.

Something inside him *shifted.*

A slow pulse, like a heartbeat that did not belong to him.

Nibluk did not like it.

Not one bit.

His lips curled back. *"That is not my purpose."*

The Ka'thir creature cocked its head again, considering him.

"Not yet."

The others whispered among themselves—though not with words. Nibluk could feel the hum of their presence, like fingers trailing against the edges of his thoughts. It made his skin crawl.

Then the one before him moved again.

Slow. Deliberate.

"You are not like the others who crawl these tunnels."

"Not like the goblins."

"Not like the dwarves."

"Not even like the ancient things that scuttle and hunger in the cracks of the world."

It leaned in, and though it had no eyes, Nibluk felt as though it were *seeing him* in a way nothing else ever had.

"You are something new."

Something inside Nibluk twisted.

He did not like this at all.

He liked to hunt.

He liked to take.

He liked to crawl, bite, strangle, stab, steal, kill.

This?

This was different.

His fingers flexed around the dagger once more, his body coiled to move.

But the blind one raised a single hand.

"You have questions," it murmured.

The others swayed again, their faceless heads tilting, their fingers twitching.

"We have answers."

Nibluk did not like the Ka'thir.

But he liked secrets.

He liked knowing what others did not.

So, he did not leave. He did not kill. Not yet.

Instead, he crouched low, his empty black eyes flickering between them.

"What do you know?"

The Ka'thir turned its faceless head toward him.

"We know that the deep is older than even the stone itself."

"We know that beneath the tunnels, beneath the roots of the world, there is something waiting."

"We know that those who find the door are never the same again."

Nibluk's skin prickled.

"And me?"

"You are marked."

It reached toward him. Not to grab, not to strike. Only to touch.

For a brief moment, something cold slid across his forehead—just a brush of its fingers.

A sudden, sharp pulse ran through his mind, and the door's symbols flashed behind his eyes.

The same ones.

The ones burned into his memory.

He jerked back with a snarl, the dagger raised between them.

The Ka'thir only lowered its hand.

"You do not know it yet, little one."

"But the deep has changed you."

Nibluk panted, his mind spinning with something he did not like—something he did not understand.

The door. The whispering. The pull. He wanted to rip it out of his skull, to stab it until it stopped writhing inside him.

But it was too late. The Ka'thir were right. He was marked. And now, there was only forward.

The Ka'thir did not attack. They did not move. They only watched. Waiting.

Nibluk had a choice. He could kill them. Spill their blood, silence their riddles, return to the deep as he had always been—crawling, feeding, hunting, *alone.*

Or he could learn.

Take what they knew. Take their whispers. Take everything they could give him and use it.

The dagger pulsed in his grip.

He exhaled slowly, his jagged teeth clicking together in thought.

Then—his lips curled into a slow, jagged grin.

"Then teach me."

The Ka'thir swayed.

"Then listen."

And so, in the black, in the cold, in the forgotten tunnels where no breath had lingered for centuries—

Nibluk began to learn. And the deep watched.

Nibluk sat cross-legged in the black, his dagger resting on his knee. The Ka'thir surrounded him in their silent, swaying rhythm, their featureless heads tilting, their long fingers twitching like something that had once been human, but had long forgotten the weight of flesh.

The deep was silent.

Then—it was not.

The voices came, not as speech, not as sound, but as *pressure* against his mind. A slow, creeping weight, slithering through his skull like roots digging into rock.

"Stone remembers."

"The tunnels whisper."

"The abyss does not sleep."

The symbols of the door burned in his mind again, shifting, reshaping themselves in ways he could not yet understand. The door had been there before goblins, before duergar, before even the Ka'thir.

It had always been there.

And it had always been hungry.

"It called to you."

"It saw you."

"You are marked now, little one."

Nibluk's fingers twitched. He did not like this. He did not like not knowing.

"Marked for what?" he rasped, his black eyes flicking between them.

The Ka'thir did not answer.

Not in words.

Instead, they *moved.*

Their faceless bodies shifted, hands reaching toward the cavern wall. Their fingers *pressed* into the stone, and the rock itself bent beneath their touch, rippling like water disturbed by a slow breath.

A passage appeared.

Not a tunnel. Not a crack.

A passage.

Nibluk’s grip tightened on his dagger. He did not trust them. He did not trust anything.

But he wanted to know.

And the deep had *never* denied him his hunger.

Nibluk followed.

The Ka’thir moved like mist, their bodies barely touching the ground as they glided into the passage. The stone walls pressed in close, too close, as if the mountain itself did not want them to pass.

The air changed.

The tunnels were always cold, but this? This was wrong.

The further they went, the deeper the silence became.

No water dripping.

No distant chitter of vermin.

No heartbeat of the deep.

Nibluk clenched his teeth. He could *feel* something waiting, just beyond the black.

The Ka’thir stopped.

They stood at the edge of a vast pit, a hole that stretched downward into nothing.

Abyssal. Hollow. A wound in the world.

Nibluk peered over the edge, his empty eyes narrowing. The darkness below was different—not the black of tunnels, not the safe, quiet dark he had known all his life.

This was something else.

Something that had never known light.

"What is this?" he rasped.

The Ka’thir swayed.

"The place where the first hunger was born."

"The place where the forgotten things sleep."

"The place where the door leads."

Nibluk’s fingers flexed. His skin itched. His mind ached.

The symbols on the door burned in his vision, twisting, reshaping—beckoning.

"And you bring me here because?"

The Ka'thir turned their faceless heads toward him.

"Because it knows you now."

"Because it wants you to listen."

Nibluk's breath was slow, measured. He did not fear.

Fear was for things that still had something to lose.

He had nothing. He was nothing. Only a crawling thing, a whisper of the deep.

And yet— The pit wanted him. The hunger in his bones was no longer his own.

The abyss called. And Nibluk listened. He did not jump. He did not hesitate. He simply stepped forward. The stone vanished beneath him, and he fell.

Down. Down. Into the dark.

The Ka'thir did not follow. They only watched. And in the hollow abyss below— Something stirred.

Nibluk fell.

The wind did not howl. The air did not rush past his ears. The black swallowed him, and the abyss took him without sound.

It was not like falling into a chasm. Not like tumbling from a ledge. There was no sense of space, no walls to scrape against, no ground rushing to meet him.

There was only the nothing.

It was cold—not the chill of stone, not the damp coolness of underground rivers. This was something *else*, something that pulled the warmth from his flesh like fingers reaching beneath his skin.

Then, a whisper.

Not words. Not voices. Just a feeling. Something was aware of him. Watching. Waiting. Then —impact.

Nibluk's body struck something that wasn't stone, wasn't flesh, wasn't water. It was soft, but not *welcoming*. It gave beneath him, shifting like it was alive, but it did not break.

He did not move. For the first time in his wretched existence, he was still. Then, the ground beneath him pulsed. Once. A slow, deep throb, like a heartbeat stretched through the bones of the earth.

Nibluk exhaled, his breath misting in the unnatural cold. He rolled onto all fours, his dagger still clutched in his trembling fingers, his empty black eyes scanning the darkness.

There was nothing to see. But there was something here. The pulse came again. Then another.

The air shifted, thickening like congealed blood, pressing against his skin, his lungs, his thoughts.

Then—the whispers came. Not the Ka'thir. Not the door. Something older. Something below even the deep.

"You have come far, crawling thing."

The voice was not heard. It was felt.

Nibluk's fingers twitched. He had no lips to curl in rage, no voice to curse what he did not understand.

But he was listening.

"You have touched the mark. You have learned the whispers. You have crept through tunnels forgotten by time."

The pulsing ground shifted beneath him.

"But you are still small."

Nibluk's teeth clicked together.

"Then make me more."

A silence stretched through the abyss.

Then—laughter. Not cruel. Not kind. Something endless. Something that had never been alive enough to know the difference.

"You wish to be made?"

Nibluk's breath was slow, steady. He did not tremble. He did not crawl.

He knelt.

"Yes."

The darkness shivered.

And something reached for him. It did not touch him with fingers, nor claws, nor tendrils. It did not grasp, did not crush, did not consume. It simply pushed itself into him.

Like water seeping into cracks. Like a whisper settling into the marrow of bone. Like hunger planting itself deep within his skin.

Nibluk did not scream. The dagger dropped from his fingers. The pulsing of the abyss grew stronger. His body twitched, the muscles in his limbs seizing as something unseen slithered through his veins.

His mind expanded. He could hear the stone breathing. He could see without eyes. He could feel the tunnels stretching in all directions, not as they were, but as they used to be.

Memories not his own flooded his skull. The Ka'thir, waiting for a master that would never return. The door, built to keep something out—or to keep something in. And the thing beneath it all—watching. Waiting.

Waiting for something to open it. Waiting for something to understand.

The laughter in the abyss faded. The whispers sank into the marrow of his bones. And then—he awoke.

Nibluk's body jerked upright. He was somewhere else. The tunnels. The familiar dark. But he was not the same. His fingers flexed. They felt stronger. His skin rippled. It shifted. His breath was deeper, slower, the air settling into his lungs like the black itself had become part of him.

And the whispers had not left. They curled in the back of his mind, waiting, watching, whispering.

Nibluk grinned. He was no longer just a crawling thing. The tunnels had changed him. The abyss had marked him. And now, he would never be small again.

Nibluk took his dagger from the stone and turned into the dark, his limbs moving different, his body twisting in ways that did not feel like his own.

And as he walked, the shadows moved with him. Something had woken beneath the mountain. And it had chosen him.

Nibluk moved through the tunnels, but he was no longer a thing that merely *crawled.*

Something had changed.

The deep had always whispered to him, but now it listened.

The shadows did not simply lie still in the cracks of the world—they shifted when he moved, stretching, breathing. The tunnels had always been tight, winding, suffocating, but now they *opened* to him, welcoming his steps.

He was *more* than he had been.

And he was still becoming.

The old hunger was still there—the need to eat, to consume, to kill.

But now, there was something else.

Something *deeper.*

He could feel the tunnels in a way he never had before. Not just as stone, not just as paths, but as veins. The deep was alive, pulsing, stretching into the forgotten corners of the world.

And something inside him ached to reach further.

To touch more.

To see beyond what eyes could know.

But first—food.

His body still needed flesh, still needed strength. And he would take it.

The deep provided.

It always had.

And it always would.

Hours passed. Or days.

Time did not exist where he walked.

But then—a sound.

Distant. Familiar.

Voices.

Harsh, guttural. Goblins.

Nibluk's fingers flexed around his dagger. His lips curled back into something that was no longer quite a grin.

They had spit on him.

They had laughed at him.

They had wanted to make him *soup.*

Now, he would show them what the deep had made him.

He slithered forward, pressing his body low, his limbs moving too smoothly, like something no longer fully bound by flesh.

The goblins would not see him.

Not until it was too late.

He crept closer, his eyes flicking toward the glow of a dimly lit fire. The goblins sat in a half-circle, gnawing on bones, muttering to themselves in their wretched, snarling tongue.

Four of them.

Nibluk could kill four.

Easily.

His fingers curled around his dagger.

But something inside him whispered.

Not yet. Not with the blade. Something new.

He closed his black eyes, his breath slow, steady.

And he called. Not with words. Not with sound. With hunger.

The shadows stirred. The fire flickered.

The goblins *paused*, their ears twitching. One of them, the largest, squinted into the black.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." One of the others tore another chunk of meat from his bone.

"No… felt wrong."

The shadows stretched closer.

They did not see. They did not know. Until one of them disappeared. Gone. No sound. No cry. Just vanished into the dark.

The others jerked upright.

"Grrnnhh?! Where'd he go?!"

Another vanished.

The last two spun, their weapons half-drawn, but there was nothing left to fight.

Just the black. Just the deep. And Nibluk.

His grin was wider now, his body breathing with the dark.

The last two tried to run. They did not get far.

When it was over, Nibluk crouched over the bodies, licking blood from his fingers, his dagger forgotten at his side.

The hunger was quiet now. But the whispers were louder. He had called. And the deep had answered.

He was not just a crawling thing anymore. Not just a hunter. Not just a forgotten shadow in the tunnels. He was part of it now. And it was part of him. He had been born in the dark.

But now— Now, he owned it. And soon, the world would know.

Nibluk sat among the corpses of the goblins, his black eyes reflecting nothing, his fingers idly tracing the hilt of his dagger. The hunger was quiet now—not gone, never gone, but satisfied.

For the moment.

The shadows pulsed around him. Not in fear, not in retreat. They moved with him now. Something had changed.

He had *called*, and the deep had answered.

He had become something more.

But he did not yet know *what*.

The Ka'thir had spoken of the door.

The abyss had taken him and *left something behind*.

Now, there was a whisper in the back of his mind—constant, crawling, like fingertips against the inside of his skull.

It did not speak words.

Not yet.

It only *pulled*.

Not north, not south, not deeper nor higher.

It pulled him inward.

Something *inside* the deep had *seen* him.

Something *inside* the deep had *marked* him.

And now, he was changing.

But he did not yet know *how*.

So he did what he had always done.

He crawled forward.

Into the tunnels.

Into the black.

Into whatever was waiting.

Nibluk moved without thought. His limbs folded and stretched, his fingers gripping the slick stone as he slithered forward. The tunnels no longer resisted him. He did not have to squeeze through cracks. He did not have to claw his way through tight spaces.

The deep opened for him. And still, the whisper in his skull itched.

Time passed in ways that no longer made sense. Had it been hours? Had it been weeks?

His hunger should have returned. His body should have weakened. But he felt stronger. He moved faster.

The black no longer *hid* things from him—he could see without seeing. The tunnels stretched in his mind, veins pulsing in the dark, *alive*.

And then— Something new. A scent. Not goblin. Not duergar. Something else. Something that did not belong here.

Nibluk stopped. He listened. And in the distant black— A faint, flickering light.

Light did not exist in the deep. Not true light. Not fire.

But this— This was different. This was torchlight.

Surface dwellers.

Nibluk had seen them before. Rare, foolish things. The kind that thought the dark was just a place, not a thing that watched back.

He crept forward, slow, silent. His body moved in ways it shouldn't, limbs folding unnaturally, his breath absent from the air.

He climbed a slick wall, clung to the ceiling, his fingers digging into the damp rock as he stared downward.

And below him— They walked. Two of them.

Humans.

Wrapped in cloth, covered in bits of metal, their faces drawn tight in the flickering torchlight. One held a rusted sword, the other clutched a thick book against his chest, muttering as they walked.

"This is madness, Bran," the book-holder hissed. *"We should not be here."*

"We need to keep moving," the other grunted. His sword hand trembled. He did not like the dark. The dark liked him.

"They said the ruins were close, past the old tunnels," the book-holder whispered. *"I don't care about treasure anymore. We need to go back."*

The one called Bran exhaled sharply.

"We can't go back. The way is blocked. We keep going or we die here."

Nibluk's grin stretched wide.

Wrong, Bran.

You keep going, and you die here.

He watched them, his black eyes gleaming in the dim firelight.

A choice. He could watch. Or he could strike. He could let them lead him to what they were seeking. Or he could let the deep take them now.

Either way— The hunger would return. And he would answer it.

Nibluk clung to the ceiling, his long fingers gripping the damp rock with ease. His black eyes flickered with the dim glow of the torch below, but he did not need its light.

He could *see* them.

Two humans. Soft. Weak. Lost.

One clutched a rusted sword, his breath short, his heart pounding in his chest. The other carried a thick book, his fingers gripping it like a shield, his mouth twitching with whispers.

"We shouldn't be here," the book-holder muttered again. His voice was tight, uneasy. *"Something is wrong."*

The other—Bran—tightened his grip on his sword. He was afraid too. But he did not speak it.

Nibluk's grin stretched.

The deep could smell their fear.

And so could he.

But he did not lunge.

Not yet.

They were searching for something. Ruins.

Something they thought was hidden. Something they thought was theirs to take.

Nibluk did not *care* for their treasures. He did not *care* for their books.

But the whisper in his skull *itched*.

The deep had *changed him*.

And it had led him *here*.

He would follow.

He would see.

And then—

Then, he would take.

The humans walked deeper into the tunnels.

The sword-holder led, his steps slow, cautious. The book-holder followed close, muttering, his fingers trembling over the pages.

Nibluk slithered behind them.

He did not walk. He did not breathe.

He was part of the black now.

The torch flickered. The air shifted. The tunnels pulsed like veins, stretching before them, leading them down.

Then—

The smell.

Nibluk's nose twitched.

Not rot. Not sweat.

Something old.

Something waiting.

The humans reached the end of the tunnel.

The book-holder gasped. *"It's real…"*

Before them, the rock had changed. It was no longer rough, no longer natural. The walls were carved, lined with symbols that twisted beneath the firelight, their shapes *writhing* when looked at too long.

The air was thick.

Heavy.

The stone remembered.

Bran stepped forward, running a hand along the carvings. His fingers traced something in the dust—a symbol, half-buried, half-lost.

Nibluk's skin prickled.

He knew that symbol.

Not by name. Not by thought.

By feeling.

It was one of the door's markings.

The humans did not know.

They had found something they did not understand.

Nibluk's fingers twitched.

They did not deserve to see.

Bran turned, his sword still half-raised.

"It's just ruins," he muttered. *"Nothing here."*

The book-holder hesitated. *"No… there's something."*

He was right.

But he was too late.

Nibluk dropped from the ceiling.

His body did not make a sound. He landed on Bran’s shoulders, his dagger already sinking into flesh.

The man’s scream barely had time to form before Nibluk’s teeth sank into his throat.

A gurgle. A wet, choking gasp.

Then silence.

The book-holder staggered back, his mouth open, his eyes wide with terror. The torch fell from his grip, landing in the dust, its flame sputtering.

"N-no—"

Nibluk turned toward him.

His mouth dripped red. His eyes gleamed empty.

The book-holder ran.

Nibluk did not chase. Not yet. He crouched, his fingers curling into the warm, still body beneath him.

He would eat. He would take.

But first— The ruins. The markings. The whisper in his skull screamed. Something was here. Something more.

The deep had led him to this place. And now, he would find out why. He grinned. And then, he began to carve the truth from the stone.

Nibluk crouched over Bran’s corpse, his clawed fingers digging into the flesh, feeling the warmth of life fading beneath his touch. The hunger gnawed at him, but something else had taken hold.

The markings.

The whispering symbols.

They *pulled* at him, crawling through his veins like roots sinking into rot. The ruins had been here long before goblins, before dwarves, before even the tunnels themselves.

The deep was old.

But this?

This was older.

Nibluk flicked his black eyes to the sputtering torch lying on the ground, casting weak, trembling light over the carved stone walls. His fingers twitched, his lips pulling back over jagged teeth.

The door’s markings were here.

Buried. Hidden. Forgotten.

He reached out, dragging his fingers through the dust, clearing the symbol that Bran had barely touched before he died.

The stone beneath was smooth, untouched by time. The carving itself twisted and bent beneath his gaze, shapes shifting, as though the rock itself was still alive.

Nibluk's breath slowed.

He placed his palm over the symbol.

And the deep spoke to him.

The stone was not silent.

The moment his flesh touched the carving, his body went rigid, his breath stolen from his lungs.

The tunnels vanished.

The ruins changed.

He was somewhere else.

A cavern, massive, endless—its walls pulsing like the inside of a great, living beast. The air was thick, pressing into his skin like unseen hands.

And in the center— The door. But it was not closed. It was open.

And beyond it— Nothing. Not blackness. Not tunnels. Not stone.

Nothing.

A hollow absence that swallowed everything, a void that stretched beyond time, beyond understanding. It did not call. It did not whisper.

It simply waited. And something stepped through it.

Nibluk could not see it. Could not name it. But he felt it.

A presence without a form, shifting, writhing, bleeding into the air like smoke given thought.

It did not belong in the tunnels. It did not belong anywhere. And yet— It was here. It had always been here.

The door had been made to keep it out. Or perhaps— To keep it in.

Nibluk's skin burned, his veins twisting, his mind splitting at the edges as the thing that was not a thing turned its attention toward him.

Then—

A single whisper.

"You will do."

And the ruins shattered.

Nibluk jerked back, his body slamming into the stone floor of the tunnel. His breath came in ragged gasps, his vision blurred, his muscles twitching.

The torch still burned beside him. The body of Bran was still warm. The ruins were still here.

But something had changed.

His skin itched. His fingers trembled. The whisper in his mind was no longer just an echo.

It was closer now. Stronger.

The thing behind the door had seen him. And now, it was watching.

Nibluk ran his tongue over his jagged teeth, his breathing slowing, his fingers pressing into the dust once more.

The deep had led him here for a reason. And now, he was no longer just marked.

He was chosen.

The door would not stay closed forever. And when it opened— He would be ready.

Nibluk grinned, his black eyes gleaming. Then, without another thought, he turned and vanished into the tunnels once more.

The deep had whispered. And now, he would answer.

The tunnels closed around Nibluk like an old friend. He moved without thinking, his limbs carrying him forward, deeper into the black, where the air was thick and watching.

The thing behind the door had seen him.

And now, he was changing.

He could feel it beneath his skin—something shifting, growing, *becoming.* The hunger was still there, but it was not just for meat anymore.

It was for understanding. For purpose. For what came next.

And something *inside him* already knew:

The deep was not done with him.

Not yet.

The hunger struck first.

Not slow. Not creeping.

Sudden. Violent. Devouring.

Nibluk fell to his knees, his claws digging into the stone, his black eyes wide, his breath ragged. His insides twisted, his veins burned, his skin rippled like something beneath it was trying to crawl free.

He clenched his teeth, his jaw locking. His fingers twitched. The whisper in his skull was no longer a whisper.

It was laughing. Something was wrong. Or maybe— Something was finally right.

His arms spasmed. His ribs cracked. He fell forward, his body folding in on itself, his back arching, his head tilting back as a sound ripped from his throat—not a scream, not a snarl—

Something else. Something not of the tunnels. Something not of the world.

And then, in the black, in the silence, in the endless crawl of the abyss— It stopped. The pain was gone.

Nibluk breathed. And he felt it. He wasn't the same.

He lifted his hands, his fingers curling, the skin stretched tighter, slicker, darker. His arms longer. His claws sharper.

His breath did not make mist. The deep had given him something. And it had taken something away.

He grinned.

The tunnels were his before.

But now?

Now, they were part of him.

He moved through the tunnels, faster, smoother, his limbs stretching in ways they never had before.

The hunger was quieter now—not gone, never gone, but no longer mindless.

It had purpose. It had direction. It had a voice.

The Ka'thir had told him the door would open.

The deep had whispered that he was not yet ready.

Now, he was becoming ready.

The world was small. The things that crawled in it—goblins, dwarves, men—were nothing.

He had fed on them before. But soon— Soon, they would feed him.

He stopped in a cavern, pressing a clawed hand to the cold stone.

And he listened. For the first time, the deep did not just whisper. It spoke.

"Open the way."

Nibluk grinned, his teeth sharp, his skin twitching.

"I will."

And so, he crawled on.

The world was not yet his. But it would be. Soon.

Nibluk crawled.

His limbs moved differently now, stretching further, gripping stone with a strength he had never needed before. His skin felt wrong—or maybe right—slick yet firm, his fingers longer, his breath quieter.

The deep had changed him. But it was not done. Not yet.

The voice in his skull—no longer a whisper, no longer a mere itch—was a *presence* now. Not words, not commands, but a pull.

Something was waiting.

Something that had always been waiting.

The Ka'thir had warned him. The ruins had shown him. The abyss had marked him.

And now, it was time to understand.

The tunnels stretched before him, winding, twisting, pulling him ever downward.

He did not need to think. He did not need to see. The path was already in his mind, carved there by something older than him.

He followed it without question. And then, he was not alone. The air shifted. The shadows moved. Not his. Not yet. Then—clicking.

Soft, rhythmic, echoing through the black.

Nibluk slowed. He pressed his body to the cold stone, his black eyes narrowing.

The tunnel widened ahead. A cavern. Massive. Endless. And within it—things that should not be.

Tall. Lithe. Wrapped in ancient, rotting cloth, their featureless heads tilting in unison. The Ka'thir. But not the ones he had met before. These ones crawled. Not like him. Not like a goblin creeping in the dark. They *moved* as if they had forgotten how to walk.

Their limbs were too long. Their fingers too thin. They scraped against the stone, their bodies folding, twitching, slithering—not human, not monster, not anything.

And they were waiting. For him. Nibluk did not move. The Ka'thir knew he was here. They had *always* known.

One of them tilted its head, the movement unnatural, its fingers twitching.

Then, in that voice like shifting stone, it spoke.

"The marked one comes."

The others moved in unison.

Not turning—shifting.

Their bodies bent wrong, their presence pressing into the air itself.

"The door has seen you."

"The hollow one has touched you."

"You will open the way."

Nibluk's fingers curled against the stone. His black eyes gleamed, his jagged teeth clicking.

"Tell me what I am."

The Ka'thir did not answer.

Not with words.

They moved. And the cavern changed. The walls were no longer stone. The ground was no longer solid. The deep itself shifted, reshaping, warping.

And Nibluk fell. Not into tunnels. Not into darkness. Into something else.

And for the first time— For the first time since the deep had whispered his name— He was afraid.

Nibluk fell.

Not down. Not through.

He fell inward.

The tunnels were gone. The deep was gone. The black was not black anymore. It was thicker, heavier, pressing into his skin like it wanted to seep inside.

His body was not his body.

His limbs stretched, then shrank, then folded into shapes that did not belong to him. His fingers bent in ways they should not, his breath was not breath, his flesh was not flesh.

The Ka'thir had done this.

Or maybe he had done this to himself.

The whisper in his skull laughed.

Not a voice. Not words.

Something *deeper*. Something that had always been laughing.

Then—stillness.

Nibluk was somewhere else.

Not a cavern. Not a ruin. Not a place.

He stood—or thought he stood—on something that was not stone. The ground was smooth, too smooth, like the surface of still water before a breath disturbs it.

The air was wrong.

It had weight.

It had *intent*.

And it was watching him.

Nibluk’s black eyes darted through the endless space. He flexed his fingers, feeling the dagger at his side. He was still himself.

But not only himself.

Something had changed.

And then, it spoke.

Not a voice. Not words.

A presence.

A pressure in his skull, coiling around his thoughts like fingers made of hunger.

"You have crawled far, little thing."

The whisper that had always been there was closer now.

"You have eaten. You have killed. You have stolen breath, stolen flesh, stolen life."

The presence pressed closer, though there was nothing to see.

"And now, you will steal something greater."

Nibluk’s teeth clicked together. His skin crawled, itching, shifting. The Ka’thir had warned him. The door had whispered to him.

Now, it was open.

"Do you know what you are?"

He did not answer.

Not with words.

He grinned.

The presence pulsed. The world around him shuddered.

"Good."

Something tore through him.

Not pain. Not cold.

Change.

His skin burned, but it was not fire. His limbs stretched, but it was not growth. His mind split apart, but it was not breaking.

It was becoming.

His bones were not bones anymore. His flesh was not flesh anymore.

The deep had whispered to him.

The door had seen him.

And now, it had given him its blessing.

Nibluk opened his eyes.

He was back.

The cavern. The Ka'thir. The ruins. The tunnels.

But he was not the same.

He could feel the tunnels now, like veins beneath his skin. He could see the black, not as absence, but as something alive.

The hunger was different. It was not just for meat anymore.

It was for the world.

The Ka'thir stood before him, watching. Their featureless faces tilted.

"The hollow has touched him."

"He is no longer just a crawling thing."

"He will open the way."

Nibluk flexed his fingers. His claws were longer now. His breath did not mist in the cold. The deep had made him something new. And soon, the world would see him.

He grinned. And then, he moved. The tunnels were his now. And nothing would stop him. He crawled for days, he crawled for hours. He went upwards this time.

Above

Nibluk rose.

Not in the tunnels. Not in the deep.

The rock had ended. The black above was not black.

It was open.

The air was thin here, too light, too strange. It did not wrap around him like the deep did. It did not hold him. It let him go.

For the first time, the thing that had always crawled was beneath something too vast to touch.

Nibluk's empty black eyes stared upward.

The moon stared back. It was cold. Silent. Watching.

Like the door. Like the thing behind the door. He did not like it. He moved.

The ground was wrong. Not stone. Not damp. Soft. Grass, thick and tangled, shifting beneath his fingers as he slithered low. The scent of dirt and living things filled his nostrils.

The sounds were new. Crickets. The rustling of leaves. The distant hoot of an owl.

This was not the deep's silence. This was a world that did not know him.

Nibluk pressed his belly to the earth, crawling forward, slinking through the wild undergrowth like a forgotten shadow. His fingers splayed over the grass, his black eyes flicking from tree to tree, from stone to stone.

He sniffed. The air carried scents he had never known. Water. Bark. Sap. Fur.

He stopped. Something moved. A small thing, scurrying through the grass.

He lunged.

Fingers snapping around soft flesh, claws sinking into warmth.

A mouse.

It squeaked, a weak little thing, its heartbeat hammering against his grip.

Nibluk did not chew. He swallowed.

The little bones cracked as they slid down his throat, the warmth settling in his belly.

The hunger was quiet for now. But it was never gone.

He crawled onward.

The trees ended. The ground sloped downward, and Nibluk smelled it before he saw it.

Water.

But not like the deep. Not the trickling pools or the cold, dead puddles in the tunnels.

This was alive. A river.

It moved fast, whispering, rushing, breathing. It stretched before him, wide and unknowable, reflecting the pale glow of the moon above.

He crouched at the edge, dipping his fingers in. The current pulled. It wanted to take him.

He lapped at it with his tongue.

Cool. Fresh. Not thick like the waters of the tunnels.

It filled his belly too quickly. He pulled back. He did not trust this open world.

Then—light.

Nibluk's black eyes narrowed. In the distance, across the hills, beyond the trees, something glowed. Not the moon. Not firelight. Something else. Something made by things that walked the surface. He slithered through the grass, pressing low, watching.

A village.

Houses, clustered together, wooden, strange. The scent of food on the wind. Smoke curling from chimneys. The faint murmur of voices in the night.

They did not know him. They did not see him. Not yet. Nibluk crouched in the shadows, his breath slow, measured. His fingers twitched.

He listened. He waited. He smelled.

And deep in his belly— The hunger stirred.

For days, Nibluk watched.

He never moved in the daylight. The sun was wrong, a thing that did not belong to him. It stretched too far, revealed too much. He stayed in the trees, in the deep grass, pressed low into the dirt, watching, listening, *learning*.

Humans walked the dirt paths of their village, moving between their wooden houses, speaking, carrying, laughing, *not knowing*.

At night, the world changed.

The village fell silent.

The lights in their windows faded one by one, and soon, only the night remained.

Nibluk crept closer.

His long fingers traced the rough wood of their walls. His black eyes peered into their little glass holes—windows—watching the humans curl beneath cloth and straw, still, weak, unmoving.

Sleeping.

They thought they were safe.

Nibluk's lips curled into a sharp, jagged grin.

He sniffed the air.

The village carried strange scents—burned wood, meat cooking over flame, damp cloth, sweat, life.

But something was stronger.

Something small, warm, packed together.

Meat.

He followed it to a small wooden cage, slats of wood bound together with rope, feathers drifting lazily in the air.

A chicken coop.

Nibluk slithered forward, pressing his fingers against the wooden gate. It was weak. Pathetic. A simple lift, and it was open.

The chickens stirred. Clucked softly. One of them ruffled its feathers, stepping toward him.

Nibluk moved fast.

His claws shot forward, snapping around its little body before it could cry out. His grip tightened. Bones snapped in his grasp. The creature spasmed.

Nibluk bit down.

Feathers stuck to his lips as he ripped it open, warm blood spilling across his tongue, flesh tearing from bone as he devoured it. He fed in gulps, not savoring, just taking.

Then, his head jerked up.

A creak.

A light in a window.

He slithered away, vanishing into the dark, becoming the night once more.

The next night, he waited.

The village was still. The humans slept, as they always did.

But not all of them stayed inside.

A door creaked open.

Nibluk watched, his black eyes gleaming in the grass, his fingers curling into the earth.

A woman stepped out.

She was alone, her bare feet pressing into the dirt as she walked beyond her house, past the coop, into the tall grass near the trees.

She muttered something under her breath. A tired sigh. A grunt of discomfort.

She was relieving herself.

Her back to the village.

Nibluk crawled.

Low, slow, silent.

The wind carried her scent to him—warm, human, alive.

She did not know.

She did not see.

Until it was too late.

Nibluk lunged.

His limbs unfolded, his body launching from the grass, his claws stretching forward.

The woman's head barely had time to turn. Her eyes widened—confusion, terror, the first gasp of a scream never born.

Nibluk's teeth sank into her throat.

Her body jerked. Her arms flailed. Her fingers scratched at his shoulders, grasping for nothing.

A wet, choking noise, the last struggle of something that was not strong enough.

Nibluk ripped back.

Blood gushed over his lips, warm and thick, soaking into the dirt. The woman collapsed, her body twitching, her eyes staring at the sky without seeing.

He fed. Tearing, devouring, taking. Flesh ripped free. Muscle snapped apart. Blood smeared across his fingers, his chest, his grin.

The hunger was silent now. Satisfied. For a time.

When the feast was over, Nibluk crouched in the grass, his breath slow, his fingers tracing the blood in the dirt.

His black eyes flicked toward the trees, toward the sky, toward the vast, open nothing above him.

This world was wrong. Too open. Too wide. Too soft.

The deep had given him a gift. It had changed him, made him more.

And in the quiet, as the village slept unknowingly, he pondered the truths that had been carved into his bones.

The deep is not a place. It is a hunger, and hunger does not sleep. The deep does not belong to the surface, but the surface will belong to the deep. Stone does not ask to be carved, yet hands shape it all the same. The flesh of the world is no different.

The ones who walk in the light do not understand what waits beneath them. They only understand when they are drowning in it. To be forgotten is to be free. The surface is bound by its own chains. In the dark, nothing binds you but hunger.

The deep does not whisper to just anyone. It calls only to those who are willing to crawl. The first thing a corpse gives is silence. It is the only thing it has ever owned. The hunger is never gone. It only waits for the next moment to feed.

The door does not want to be opened. The thing behind it simply wants to be remembered. The surface thinks it has no deep, but it is wrong. The deep only waits for the right thing to bring it to them.

Nibluk licked his fingers, his jagged teeth bared in satisfaction.

The village was still quiet.

No one knew. Not yet. But soon.

He crawled back into the grass, his black eyes gleaming. He would listen. He would wait.

And then, when the time was right— He would take. The surface world had fed him tonight.

Nibluk did not leave.

He crouched in the deep grass, his slick fingers pressing into the earth, his black eyes watching the village breathe. The houses sat still, their windows glowing faintly with the dying embers of fire pits.

The body lay in the shadows of the trees, forgotten, cooling.

The surface world had never known the deep.

Not like this.

Not yet.

But soon.

He curled his long fingers against the blood-stained dirt, his jagged teeth gleaming in the moonlight. How long would it take?

How long before they knew?

Would another human step into the night, yawning, stretching, moving toward the trees to relieve themselves? Would they stop, smell the air, catch the scent of spilled life?

Would they see her?

Would they scream?

The thought made his body twitch with pleasure.

Nibluk did not hunger yet, but there was something better than feeding.

Something sweeter.

Fear.

The morning came.

Nibluk hated it.

The sky turned gray, then orange, then pale blue, and the air became warm, too warm. The light stretched through the trees, touching places it should not, creeping into the shadows where he lurked.

He stayed low, buried in the grass, his black eyes narrow slits as he watched.

Then—a voice.

"Marta? Marta, where are you?"

A man's voice.

A human stepped from one of the wooden houses, blinking at the morning light, scratching his thick, hairy head.

"She didn't come back inside?" Another voice, this one a woman's, worried.

The man frowned. He turned toward the trees.

"Marta?"

Closer.

Nibluk could feel it.

The moment before realization.

The moment before fear.

Then—the scream.

The humans gathered quickly.

They swarmed to the trees, their bare feet kicking up dirt, their voices rising, a mix of shock, grief, and terror.

A woman sobbed. A child hid behind his mother's skirts. The men muttered to each other, their faces dark, their eyes scanning the wrong places.

"A wolf." One of them muttered. *"Had to be."*

"Wolves don't do this." Another spat.

The village was afraid.

And they did not know why.

Nibluk grinned.

They did not look to the grass. They did not look to the shadows. They did not think to check beneath their feet.

They only looked ahead.

And so, Nibluk watched. He listened. He waited. They would not see him. Not yet. But soon.

By nightfall, the village had changed. Doors that once stood open were shut. Fires burned brighter, longer. The humans walked in pairs now, never alone. They whispered. They feared the dark.

Good.

Nibluk slithered through the grass, his body low, his breath slow. His limbs moved different now, smoother, quieter, unnatural.

He passed by the houses, his fingers trailing against wooden walls, feeling the vibrations of voices inside.

They did not know. They could not know. Not yet.

But the deep did not rush. The deep waited. The deep always waited.

He licked his lips. The first fear had settled. Now, he would spread it.

Nibluk did not take another.

Not yet.

The village was changing. He could see it, feel it. The way they moved, the way their eyes darted into the dark, the way their breath caught when the wind shifted through the grass.

They did not know what stalked them. That was better.

The deep did not take quickly. The deep did not strike and leave. The deep crawled into their bones. It would own them before it ever took their breath.

And Nibluk would teach them. He moved through the village at night. Not to kill. Not to feed. To be seen, but never caught. To make them doubt their own eyes.

A shadow just beyond the torchlight. A rustle in the grass when no wind blew. A whisper against a window with no mouth to speak.

A handprint on a wooden wall, too long, too thin, too deep.

A door left open when they swore they had locked it.

A chicken cage unlatched, the birds inside not eaten, not stolen, just broken.

Fear was not just in the kill. Fear was in the waiting. The not knowing.

Nibluk was the deep now. And the deep did not need to take to own.

By the third night, they were not sleeping.

The men gathered in small groups, their hands tight around weapons.

"Something is out there."

"We should leave."

"Where would we go? It’s just some damn beast."

But they knew it wasn’t.

Not a wolf. Not a man. Something else. Something that watched them. Something that waited.

By the fourth night, one of them tried to run.

A young boy, no more than thirteen summers, bolted from his home, his voice a raw sob, his feet slapping the dirt.

"I don’t want to stay! It’s here! It’s HERE!"

The men caught him. Held him. Dragged him back inside.

They told him he was wrong.

But he wasn’t.

Nibluk had been watching him all night.

And the boy had seen. Not all of him. Just enough. Enough to know.

But the humans did not listen. They never did.

And so, Nibluk waited.

On the fifth night, they made a mistake.

A man. Tired. Weak. Afraid. He left his home alone. Just for a moment. A breath of air. A brief escape from the whispers, the doubt, the walls closing in.

He stepped outside. He walked toward the well. His hands shook as he pulled the bucket up. He wiped the sweat from his brow. He turned.

And Nibluk was there.

The man’s breath caught. His body froze.

A shadow in the grass. A thing with black, empty eyes. Too long. Too thin. Too wrong.

The man’s mouth opened to scream.

Nibluk vanished. Nothing. No one.

Had he imagined it? Had he lost his mind? He stumbled back inside, locking the door behind him.

"Nothing was there," he whispered to himself.

"Nothing was there."

But he didn’t believe it. And by morning, the whole village knew. The thing in the dark was real. And it was watching.

Nibluk waited.

The village was sick with fear.

The people did not leave their homes at night. They barely left during the day. They whispered behind closed doors, huddled in small groups, clutching weapons that would not save them.

They did not know what hunted them.

But they knew it was there.

And that was better than any kill.

Fear was not a blade. It was a sickness.

It did not strike once.

It spread.

And soon, it would consume them all.

The man who had seen Nibluk at the well had not slept.

The others did not believe him.

"It was nothing."

"A shadow. A trick of the dark."

But he knew.

And so, he watched the windows.

He watched the grass.

He watched the places between the light.

His wife pleaded with him. "You need rest."

But he could not rest.

He sat by the door, gripping his axe, waiting.

Waiting for it to come back.

And in the night, when the village was silent, when the torches burned low, when the others had drifted into uneasy sleep—

Nibluk knocked on his door. Once. Soft.

The man’s breath stopped. The axe trembled in his grip. He did not move. The silence stretched. Then— Another knock. Soft. Closer. Wrong.

A trembling whisper from his wife. "Who is it?"

His mouth was dry. His fingers clenched. Nothing answered. He stood. Step by step, he moved to the door, axe raised. His breath was ragged. The whole village was asleep.

No one else was outside. The door creaked as he pulled it open. The night was still. Nothing was there. No footprints in the dirt. No figure in the grass. Just the whisper of wind.

The man stepped outside. Just a little. His eyes darted left. Right. Nothing. He let out a slow, shaking breath. Had he imagined it? Had he—

A hand curled around his ankle. Cold. Wrong.

The man screamed. The axe fell. The shadows dragged him down.

His wife heard him. She ran to the door. He was gone. The night was silent.

Only the axe remained, lying in the dirt, its handle smeared with blood.

By morning, they had found the axe. They had found the blood. But not the man. There was no body. No struggle. No tracks. Nothing. He had simply disappeared. And now, the whispers became screams.

"It's real."

"We have to leave."

"We can't! The roads are too dangerous at night!"

"Then we leave now!"

But fear did not let them go. Fear held them here. Fear made them doubt. They would stay. They would wait.

And Nibluk would keep watching. Until there was nothing left.

Nibluk waited.

The village was unraveling like a frayed rope, its people clutching at the loose strands, trying desperately to hold on to something that was already slipping through their fingers. The disappearance of the man had shattered whatever fragile sense of control they had left. There was no body, no signs of a struggle—just an empty doorway, a bloodstained axe, and the silent, gaping fear in the eyes of those who remained.

They could not explain it. They could not fight it.

And that was the beauty of it.

Nibluk did not need to strike them down one by one. He did not need to rip their throats out like the woman in the grass. He had already poisoned them. Not with claws, not with teeth, but with doubt.

And doubt was a slow, rotting thing.

They no longer trusted their own senses. They no longer trusted each other.

Men whispered in dark corners, speaking of leaving before it was too late, of taking their wives, their children, of abandoning the village before the thing in the dark took another. Others scoffed at them, calling them cowards, but their voices were thin, weak, barely able to hold back the shaking in their bones.

The women no longer stepped outside alone. The children, once laughing and running through the dirt paths, now clung to their mothers, whispering of shadows at the windows, long hands in the night.

The village was still alive. But it was not living.

It was waiting to die.

And Nibluk was patient.

By the third night after the disappearance, sleep had become a fragile, fleeting thing for the people of the village. Torches burned at every doorway, lanterns hung in windows, their glow stretching long fingers of light across the dirt paths. But the flames could not touch everything. There were still shadows. There were still places where the light did not reach.

And Nibluk moved between them.

He slithered low, pressing his body into the cold earth, letting the grass hide his shape. His black, empty eyes flicked from house to house, watching the dim glow of candlelight flicker behind thin wooden walls. He could hear them inside, could hear their breath, shallow and restless, could hear their shifting, their tossing and turning, their quiet, fearful mutterings.

They were not sleeping.

Not truly.

Even now, even as exhaustion gnawed at their bones, they were waiting.

Waiting for the thing in the dark to take another.

And tonight, it would.

Nibluk moved toward one of the smaller houses near the edge of the village, where the torches had burned lower, their flames sputtering, nearly drowned in the damp night air. The door was bolted. The windows locked.

It did not matter.

He slithered to the side of the house, where the wooden planks had begun to rot, where the gaps between them were wide enough. His fingers curled against the edges of the wood, his body stretching, pressing, shifting in a way that was not natural, that was no longer bound by the same laws as the things that walked in the daylight.

He pushed through.

The wood groaned softly, the house itself seeming to breathe as he slid inside.

A single room. A bed in the corner. A woman and a child curled together beneath a thick, tattered blanket, their bodies tense even in sleep.

He could smell them. The salt of their sweat. The fear clinging to their skin. The exhaustion wrapped around them like a second blanket.

The woman stirred.

Her breath hitched, her body shifting slightly, her eyelids fluttering.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, something told her to wake up.

She did not listen.

Nibluk moved closer.

The child made a soft sound, a whimper in his sleep, pressing his face against his mother's arm. The woman exhaled slowly, calming, her body relaxing once more.

She did not see him. She did not hear him. She only felt him— For a single, fleeting moment — Before his fingers closed around her throat.

She woke with a gasp, her body jerking, hands flying up to claw at him, to fight, but it was too late. Nibluk clamped down tighter, his grip unyielding, his arms like iron bands wrapped around her frail human neck.

She tried to kick, tried to make a sound, tried to shake the child awake, but her breath would not come.

Nibluk did not rush.

He did not tear her throat out like the woman in the grass.

He did not let her scream, did not let her flail wildly, did not let her wake the village.

He simply held on.

His fingers pressed deeper. Her breath became nothing. Her struggles weakened. Her body went still. And then, she was gone.

The child stirred.

A soft, sleepy sound. Small fingers reaching toward where his mother had been.

Nibluk slipped away, back into the hole in the wall, back into the night, leaving only silence behind.

The boy would wake soon.

He would find her cold.

And then the village would break.

By morning, the boy's screams tore through the village like a blade.

Men and women rushed from their homes, eyes hollow, breath hitching, the torches in their hands shaking. The second death had come, not in the trees, not beyond the village, but inside their own walls.

The village was no longer safe.

Some of them fell to their knees, pressing their faces to the dirt, praying to gods that had never set foot in the deep. Others yelled, their fear twisting into rage, demanding answers where there were none.

But it did not matter.

It was too late.

The village had been sick with fear.

Now, it was dying from it.

Nibluk watched from the grass, his black eyes gleaming, his grin wide.

They would turn on each other soon. They would fight. They would run. They would die.

And the best part? He did not even need to touch them anymore. The deep was inside them now. And it would finish the work for him.

Nibluk did not move. He did not need to.

The village was devouring itself.

The second death had broken them. The first could have been ignored, rationalized, blamed on wolves or bandits or misfortune. But this? This was something else.

The woman had died in her own bed.

There were no tracks. No broken doors. No signs of struggle.

Only a boy’s screams, only horror, only the empty, unanswered question hanging over their heads like a blade.

"What is happening to us?"

They did not know.

And that was better than any knife.

By midday, the village was boiling.

Men shouted in the dirt paths, their voices thick with exhaustion and fury, their hands tightening on axes and pitchforks.

"Someone is doing this!" one of them roared, his face red with anger. *"It’s not wolves! It’s not spirits! It’s a killer! A man among us!"*

"Then who?" another snapped. *"Who would do this?"*

"One of you!"

The argument turned to shoving.

Shoving turned to fists.

Soon, they were swinging, rolling in the dirt, curses spilling from their lips as their fear twisted into violence.

Nibluk watched from the tall grass.

He did not need to kill them.

They were already doing it for him.

By sundown, the first ones ran.

A family—two men, a woman, a child—packed whatever they could carry into a cart, their heads low, their movements quick.

"We’re leaving."

"The roads aren’t safe at night!"

"Neither is staying here!"

The others watched them go. Some whispered, some cursed them for cowardice. But no one stopped them.

No one wanted to admit that they wanted to leave, too.

But leaving was just another kind of death.

There were things in the woods.

Things worse than the village.

Weren't there?

The doubt paralyzed them.

That was what Nibluk loved the most.

Not the fear. Not the hunger.

But the hesitation.

The moment before the final breath.

The moment when they knew they were already dead.

And yet, they still hoped.

Foolish, blind, useless hope.

Soon, that would be gone, too.

Nibluk did not wait long.

The moment the village settled into silence, when exhaustion had dragged them into restless sleep, he moved.

This time, he did not creep through gaps in wooden walls, did not slither through the black unnoticed.

This time, he wanted them to hear.

He wanted them to wake.

The house was small, nestled close to the others, its torches long burned out, its door cracked just enough.

He pushed it open with slow, deliberate care.

A creak.

The air shifted.

Inside, two brothers slept, their chests rising and falling beneath thin blankets, the room thick with the scent of sweat and stale bread.

Nibluk waited.

A shift. A stir. One of them mumbled, turning onto his side.

That was enough. Nibluk lunged.

His hands clamped down on the first brother's throat, pinning him, his claws digging into skin.

The man's eyes snapped open, panic spilling into his breathless gasps as his hands flew up, clawing at the thing above him.

Too late.

His brother woke.

For a second, there was nothing but confusion.

Then—the scream.

It ripped through the house, through the stillness of the night, through the entire rotting corpse of the village.

Nibluk grinned.

The deep had spoken to them.

And now, they had heard.

The scream brought them all.

Doors slammed open. Feet pounded the dirt paths. Voices shouted.

Men and women rushed toward the house, torches in hand, faces twisted with fear and fury.

By the time they reached the doorway, Nibluk was gone.

The first brother was still twitching, his throat a gutted ruin. His brother wept, screaming through his sobs, babbling of black eyes, long fingers, teeth in the dark.

The village saw. They understood. They knew what hunted them now. But they still did not know what to do. They could not fight it. They could not stop it.

The deep had come to their doors. And they had let it in.

By morning, half the village had fled. They packed their carts, gathered their children, took whatever they could carry and vanished down the road. The ones who stayed were silent, their faces hollow, their bodies tired, ruined, empty. No one spoke of burying the dead. No one spoke of chasing the thing that had killed them.

There was nothing to be done. The village was already gone. It just hadn't stopped breathing yet.

Nibluk watched from the trees, his black eyes gleaming, his body stretched, changed, deeper than it had ever been.

He had taken nothing. Yet he had taken everything.

This was what the deep did. It did not kill. It claimed. And now, this place belonged to it.

Nibluk was not hungry. Not yet.

He had fed well.

But the world was wide, and the surface was full of places that thought they were safe.

Thought the deep was just something beneath them.

He would show them otherwise.

He turned from the ruins of the village, slipping into the trees, vanishing. He would find another place. He would watch. He would wait.

And when the time was right— He would bring the abyss with him.

The deep was no longer just a place. Now, it had a voice. And soon, the world would listen.

The deep had emptied the village.

The people who fled thought they had escaped it.

They were wrong.

Nibluk did not let them go. He followed. He watched. He crawled between the trees, unseen, silent, waiting.

They were weak now. Tired. Scared. Lost.

And alone.

One by one, they would fall.

The village was dead.

Now, its survivors would be, too.

The first to die was a man who had lagged behind the others, his breath heavy, his feet dragging in the dirt. He had a sack slung over his back, his shoulders hunched, his hands clenching and unclenching as he muttered to himself.

"Had to leave. Had to go. Wasn't safe. Wasn't safe."

His voice shook.

His fear bled from his skin.

Nibluk moved through the trees beside him, his body stretching low, his fingers curling into the damp earth. The man's torch burned weakly, flickering, barely able to keep the night away.

Then, the wind shifted.

The torch flickered once—twice—then died.

The man froze.

"No. No, no, no, no—"

The last thing he heard was breathing behind him.

The last thing he felt was hands curling around his ribs, pulling him backward into the trees.

The last thing he saw was nothing.

Because Nibluk tore out his throat before he could turn around.

The next to die were a woman and her boy, stopping to rest by a dying campfire at the roadside. She had taken her son in the night, wrapped him in a thick blanket, whispering soft lies to him as she pressed a trembling kiss to his forehead.

"We'll be safe soon, love. We just need to keep walking. Just a little longer."

The boy believed her.

But the deep did not.

Nibluk crouched behind a gnarled tree, his head tilting, his fingers pressing against the bark.

The woman did not sleep.

She sat by the fire, staring into the flames, her arms wrapped tightly around her child. Her face was hollow. Her hands trembled.

She was waiting.

Waiting for something to take her, just like it had taken the others.

She was right. The fire flickered. The wind rose. The boy shifted in his sleep.

And then, Nibluk moved.

He lunged from the black, his claws catching the woman's jaw before she could scream. She fought, her fingers clawing at his arms, her body thrashing.

But he was stronger now.

She was nothing. She fell onto her back, choking, gurgling, her legs kicking in the dirt. She died with her son still sleeping beside her.

Nibluk crouched over the body, ripping into her throat, sucking the warm blood from her neck, tearing into her belly with jagged teeth.

The child stirred. His black eyes flicked toward the small form, still curled, still sleeping, still unaware.

For a moment, he considered taking the boy, too. But no. The deep had patience.

Let him wake. Let him find his mother's body ripped open beside him. Let him scream. Fear was sweeter when it had time to fester.

Nibluk vanished into the trees.

The child would live. For now.

The merchant was cleverer than the others.

He did not stop to rest. He did not linger in the open.

He left the road, thinking he could hide in the trees, wrapping himself in his thick cloak, his back pressed against a broad rock.

"Just need to wait till morning. Just need to—"

His own whisper cut off. The wind had changed. The trees had gone silent. Something was watching.

His fingers tightened around the hilt of a dagger, his breath ragged. His heartbeat hammered in his chest.

He swallowed. Turned his head. Saw nothing. A shaky laugh escaped his lips.

"Hah… just my mind playing tricks on me. I—"

The darkness behind him moved.

Long fingers curled around his face.

His skull cracked as it slammed against the stone. Again. Again. Again. Blood spattered the rock.

Nibluk licked his lips, running his tongue over his jagged teeth as he ripped the man's body open.

The merchant had tried to be smart. But the deep did not care for cleverness. Only hunger.

The last two died together.

They had heard the screams. They had found the bodies.

They had drawn their swords, their eyes wide with terror, their hands shaking.

"It's still hunting us."

"We should have never left the village."

"We should have—"

Snap.

The first guard's head jerked sideways, his neck twisting violently, his body dropping lifelessly to the dirt.

The second turned—too slow.

Nibluk tore his belly open, his claws digging into soft organs, his teeth sinking into the man's throat.

The guard collapsed, his lifeblood soaking into the road, his fingers twitching.

It took him longer to die.

Long enough to see the creature crouched over him.

Long enough to know he had never escaped at all.

By dawn, the bodies were scattered along the path, their eyes wide, their faces frozen in horror.

Some were torn apart, gutted like animals.

Some were drained, their skin pale, lifeless, dry.

Some had no wounds at all—only their twisted, broken necks, their crushed skulls, their lifeless mouths gaping in silent, unfinished screams.

The road did not lead to safety. It only led to more death. Nibluk stood among the carnage, his black eyes gleaming, his mouth dripping red. The deep did not take quickly. It did not rush.

But it always took everything.

The village was barely alive.

Only four remained. Four frightened, broken things, clinging to their last shreds of hope, too afraid to flee, too exhausted to fight, too weak to survive.

Nibluk slithered back into the place that had already died, creeping through the grass, his black eyes flicking between the remaining houses, his long fingers trailing over the wooden walls as he moved.

The deep had emptied this place. It had rotted them from the inside, gnawed at their spirits, made them hollow.

And yet, they still breathed.

That was a mistake.

Nibluk licked his lips, his tongue running over jagged teeth. The first to sleep would be the first to die.

The village had sealed itself in.

Doors were barred shut. Windows nailed closed.

They thought they had locked out the thing that hunted them.

They were wrong.

Nibluk was no longer bound to the same rules as flesh-bound things. He did not walk through doors. He did not smash through walls.

He crawled above them.

He slithered onto the rooftops, his long limbs folding, stretching, gripping the wooden beams as he pressed his face into the chimneys. The stone was still warm from the dying embers inside.

He slipped through like smoke.

The first house was silent.

The first victim lay in bed, his breath slow, his eyes fluttering in uneasy sleep, the weight of exhaustion dragging him into weakness.

Nibluk descended.

His body moved without sound, his fingers curling into the edges of the bed frame. His lips pulled back, teeth gleaming.

One breath.

Two.

Then—

His jaw unhinged, and he sank his teeth into the soft flesh of the man's throat.

A gurgle. A single, jerking twitch. A weak, futile kick beneath the blankets.

Then—nothing.

Blood poured over the sheets.

Nibluk licked the warmth from his lips and moved on.

The second house was worse.

Inside, a woman slept, curled into herself, her body wrapped in too many blankets, as if hiding would keep her safe.

Nibluk descended from the chimney, landing beside her bed. He watched her sleep, watched her fingers twitch, watched the soft rise and fall of her chest.

She dreamed of something.

Something better than this place.

He ended it.

His fingers clamped over her mouth as his teeth ripped into her neck, her body jerking violently as her muffled screams died in her throat. Nibluk sucked her blood from the neck.

The blankets darkened with blood, soaking through.

By the time he was done, she was still warm, but she was gone.

He licked his fingers clean and moved to the next.

The last house still had life in it.

The last man did not sleep.

He sat in the dark, axe in his hands, waiting.

He had heard the others die. He had heard the choking gasps, the snapping bones, the wet sound of flesh tearing open.

He had known this moment would come.

And he had chosen not to run.

Nibluk slithered through the chimney, pressing into the room like a whisper of smoke. His black eyes gleamed in the dim light of a dying candle.

The man was already standing.

"I see you."

His voice was ragged, hollow, already broken.

Nibluk grinned, baring teeth slick with blood.

Then, the man swung.

The axe ripped through the air, faster than Nibluk had expected. He twisted his body, but not fast enough.

The blade bit deep into his shoulder.

A sharp, searing pain.

Nibluk hissed.

The man roared.

He yanked the axe free and swung again, his movements wild, desperate, full of nothing but terror and rage.

Nibluk ducked, his long limbs snapping forward, fingers clawing at the man’s legs. The human stumbled, but did not fall.

Another swing.

Another cut.

Blood spilled down Nibluk’s arm.

This was not like the others.

This one would not go quietly.

Nibluk lunged, crashing into the man’s chest, sending them both slamming against the wooden wall.

The axe fell.

The man’s fists pounded into Nibluk’s skull, his ribs, his jaw, anything he could reach. He fought like a dying thing.

And for a moment—just a moment—Nibluk felt something he had not felt in a long time.

Pain.

But the deep had changed him.

He was not just a thing that crawled anymore.

He was more.

The man tried to shove him off.

Tried to reach for the axe.

But Nibluk sank his teeth into his wrist, biting down hard, twisting, cracking bone.

The human screamed.

Nibluk clawed at his belly, ripping fabric, tearing flesh, spilling warmth.

The man staggered, gasping, choking, blood pouring from his wounds.

He collapsed to his knees. His hands clutched his belly, trying to hold himself together. He looked up. His lips moved, but no words came. His body swayed, trembling. Then, finally—he fell.

Nibluk crouched over him, his fingers curling into the man's bloodied chest, his head tilting.

The man's breath was ragged, weak, fading. His eyes, wide and unseeing, still held the last remnants of fight. But there was no winning. Not against the deep. Not against the thing that had already claimed this place.

Nibluk licked the blood from his lips.

The village was empty now. The fight was over. And the hunger was satisfied. For now.

The bodies lay where they had fallen, their eyes open, their throats torn, their blood soaking into the floors of their homes.

The village was nothing now. No more whispers. No more fear. Only silence.

Nibluk rose from the last corpse, licking his fingers, flexing his limbs. His wounds were already closing. His body already healing.

The deep had fed him well.

The surface had been good to him.

It had given him fear, blood, meat. It had let him crawl unseen through its fragile little homes, had let him watch as humans shattered beneath his whispers.

But he had taken enough—for now.

The hunger would return. It always did. But something else had begun to pull at him. A weight in his mind, a whisper curling just beneath thought. It had started the night he left the village. Soft at first, like the shifting of distant stone.

Now, it was louder. Calling him. Bringing him back.

Back to the door.

Nibluk did not fight it. He had felt this pull before. The deep had never lied to him.

It had whispered promises in the dark, had taken him into its depths, had shaped him into something more.

Now, it would show him what came next.

He slithered into the caves for days, feeling the cold air wrap around him, the weight of the earth pressing down once more. His fingers curled against the slick stone, his body moving in easy, twisting motions as he descended, deeper and deeper, past the tunnels he knew, past the Ka'thir ruins, past the places where light had never touched.

And then— The door. Waiting for him. Just as he had left it. And yet, it was not the same.

Before, the door had been stone. Massive. Cold. A thing carved with symbols that twisted beneath his gaze, shifting like something alive.

Now, it breathed. Not with air. Not with movement. But with presence.

The markings no longer sat still. They crawled. The rock trembled as if something behind it was pressing against the other side, waiting for release.

And the whisper in his mind was no longer just a whisper.

It was a voice.

"You came back."

Nibluk did not flinch.

His empty black eyes traced the shifting symbols, his long fingers curling against the stone.

"You called me."

The presence behind the door laughed.

Not a sound.

Something deeper.

Something that moved through the bones of the earth.

"I did."

The door shuddered. For the first time, Nibluk felt warmth. Not from the stone. Not from the deep. From the thing behind it.

"You have learned well," the voice murmured. *"You have taken. You have spread the hollow. You have walked in the world above and fed it to the abyss."*

The symbols shifted, twisting into new shapes.

Shapes he understood now. Not letters. Not words. A command. A key.

"You are ready to see."

Nibluk's fingers twitched. His mouth curled into a slow, jagged grin.

"Then show me."

A deep groan echoed through the cavern.

Not metal. Not stone. Something older. Something that had never been meant to move.

The carvings glowed. The air shook. The weight of the deep doubled, tripled, crashed down upon him like a living thing.

Then— The door split. A crack formed in the center, widening, shifting, the great slabs pulling apart. And beyond— Darkness.

Not the dark of the deep. Not the black of tunnels. Something worse. Something that had never known light. Something that had been waiting longer than time itself. And now— It was free.

Nibluk stepped forward. His black eyes peered into the void beyond, his fingers twitching with anticipation.

Then, it stepped forward, too. Something from the other side. Not flesh. Not shadow. A shape that should not be. It did not crawl. It did not walk. It unfolded. And it looked at him.

"You have opened the way."

The words were not spoken. They were pressed into his mind, curling through his thoughts like fingers pulling apart a skull.

Nibluk did not move. Did not breathe. His jagged grin stretched wider.

"What are you?" he whispered.

The thing behind the door laughed.

"A question with too many answers."

"But for now, you may call me... Master."

The blackness beyond the door was not like the deep. It was not like the night, or the tunnels, or the places where the earth pressed in tight.

This was something else.

Something that had never moved freely.

Something that had been waiting.

And now, it was loose.

Nibluk stared into it, his black eyes drinking in the impossible shape that had unfolded from the void. It had no true form, no real flesh, but it was there.

It was watching him.

And it was smiling.

"You have done well."

The words slithered through his mind like fingers curling around a throat, pressing, testing, measuring. They did not echo. They did not breathe.

They simply were.

Nibluk did not flinch.

"I did what the deep wanted."

The thing chuckled.

"Did you? Or did you do what I wanted?"

The grin on Nibluk's lips did not falter.

"What's the difference?"

The thing moved.

Not forward. Not sideways. It shifted, its shape bending in a way that defied sight.

"You understand much already. That is why you were chosen. That is why you were marked."

The markings on the door had burned into his memory, twisted into his flesh, changed him from the moment he had touched them. He had thought they were just symbols.

But they were something more.

A binding.

A promise.

And now, the promise had been fulfilled.

"You opened the way," the thing murmured, its voice curling against his skin, brushing his thoughts like a hand dragging through water.

"Now, you will walk it."

Nibluk’s fingers twitched.

"Walk where?"

The thing did not answer.

Not with words.

The darkness moved.

The door collapsed behind him.

And the world was gone.

Nibluk stood in nothing.

No walls. No tunnels. No stone.

The deep had always held him, always wrapped around him like a second skin. Even in the surface world, he had felt the weight of it behind him, watching, pressing, whispering.

But here—

Here, there was nothing.

He turned, his black eyes narrowing.

The thing stood before him—if "stood" was even the right word. Its body stretched and folded, its shape never quite settling, its edges flickering like a shadow cast by a flame that did not burn.

Nibluk licked his lips.

"Where is this?"

The thing smiled.

"A place before places."

"A world that was shut away."

"And now, you walk upon it."

Nibluk’s fingers curled against his sides.

The ground beneath him did not exist, yet he could stand upon it.

The air did not move, yet he could breathe it.

Nothing here was real.

And yet, he was here.

"You brought me here," he muttered.

"No," the thing whispered.

"You brought yourself."

Shapes moved in the distance.

Not creatures. Not things.

Remnants.

The echoes of something that had been alive once, but had long since become part of the void itself.

They twitched.

They pulsed.

They watched.

"They are not ready," the thing said. *"Not yet. Not like you."*

Nibluk felt a pull in his chest—something cold, deep, ancient.

"Then what am I ready for?"

The thing grinned wider.

"To become more."

The echoes drifted closer.

Nibluk could feel them inside him, even before they reached him, could feel them pressing into his thoughts, their forms twisting against his skin without ever touching him.

They were hungry.

But so was he.

The thing behind the door watched.

"Prove yourself."

Nibluk’s lips curled back.

"Gladly."

And then—

The things lunged. They moved like nightmares. Not like men. Not like goblins. Not like anything with shape or law. They folded. They stretched. Their limbs were not limbs. Their teeth were not teeth. And they came for him.

Nibluk did not run. He met them.

The first lunged, its body unraveling into long, grasping things that slithered toward his flesh.

Nibluk twisted, his dagger flashing through the dark, cutting through nothing, cutting through everything.

The thing howled.

Black ichor splattered across the empty ground.

The second wrapped around his limbs, twisting, tightening, trying to pull him apart.

Nibluk opened his mouth and bit down.

His teeth sank into it, his jaw crushing something that had never had bones, never had flesh, never had a form to destroy.

It screamed. It dissolved. The third wrapped around his skull. Nibluk tore into it with his claws. He ripped it apart, feeling the void bleed over his fingers, feeling the deep itself scream in his grasp.

And then— It was over.

The echoes were gone. Only he remained. And the thing behind the door was laughing.

"Yes," it murmured, its voice curling through him now, deeper, closer, inside his marrow.

"You will do well."

Nibluk panted. His body twitched. His skin shivered. Something inside him had changed again. He could feel it moving in his veins. He was not done becoming. And he knew, deep in his black, empty heart— He never would be.

Nibluk stood in the void, his body twitching, his limbs flexing, feeling the changes spreading through him like roots digging into old, rotted earth. He had killed before. He had fed before. But this was different.

The things he had fought—the echoes—had not been creatures. They had not been flesh, not like the humans on the surface, not even like the things that crawled in the tunnels.

They had been pieces of something larger. And now, he had taken them into himself. He could feel them inside. Twisting. Shifting. Waiting. The thing behind the door watched him. It did not breathe, it did not blink, but it was watching. It was pleased.

"You feel it, don't you?"

Nibluk's black eyes narrowed. His fingers twitched. His skin felt stretched too thin, as if something beneath it wanted out.

"What did you do to me?"

The thing smiled.

"I did nothing."

"You fed. You took. You became."

It tilted its head, its shape shifting again, its edges flickering like dying candlelight.

"You have always been hollow. But now—"

It leaned closer.

"Now, you are something that can be filled."

The door had opened. The thing had been released. But this was not the end.

Nibluk had thought he was done becoming. He had thought he had reached the peak of what he could be.

He was wrong. Something inside him moved. Not flesh. Not hunger. Something deeper. The echoes had not just died. They had become part of him. And now, they whispered. Not in words. Not yet.

But he could feel them there. Waiting. Watching. Just like the deep had always watched him.

"You are not done," the thing said. *"You are only beginning."*

The void rippled.

A pulse, slow and deep, shaking the nothingness around them.

"The hollow has given you its gift."

"Now, you will use it."

Nibluk's fingers curled into claws.

He could feel something pressing against his skin.

Something not him. Something more. And for the first time, a thought crept into his mind. A thought that was not his own. A whisper that did not come from the deep. It came from inside him.

"Let us out."

Nibluk grinned.

The deep had always whispered to him. But now, it was inside him. Not just whispering. Changing him. He flexed his fingers. They stretched longer than before. His limbs moved with a fluid, unnatural ease.

He could feel his skin shifting, feel the echoes pressing against it, pressing through it, reshaping it.

He did not know what he was becoming. But he knew it was not done. And that thought pleased him. He turned to the thing behind the door.

"What happens now?"

The thing smiled.

"Now? Now you will see what you were made for."

The void split open. Reality shook. And the deep swallowed him whole.

Nibluk fell.

Not through tunnels. Not through shadow.

He fell through something deeper.

The void swallowed him, stretching him, pulling him apart and putting him back together again. He felt his limbs twist, lengthen, shrink, reshape. His bones, if he still had any, bent at new angles. His fingers curled into claws that did not end in flesh.

Something else was inside him now.

Not just hunger. Not just whispers. Something old. Something that had been waiting. The deep had always spoken to him. Now, he was the deep.

And when he landed— The world was different. He was not in the tunnels anymore. He was not on the surface. He was somewhere in between. The ground beneath him was slick, shifting, not quite solid. The air was thick, pressing against his skin, clinging to him like wet cloth.

The walls breathed. Or maybe they moved. Or maybe there were no walls at all.

Shapes floated in the darkness, things that were not quite alive, not quite dead.

Things that watched. Not with eyes. With hunger. The echoes were here. The ones he had taken into himself. And now, they were part of this place. Just like he was.

A sound rippled through the space. Not a voice. Not words. Something deeper. Something closer now.

"You are not done becoming."

Nibluk's fingers twitched.

His form shifted, still settling, still reshaping itself into something new.

The echoes curled around him, drifting, whispering without speaking. And then— Something moved in the dark. Not an echo. Not a whisper. Something bigger. Something that had been waiting for him.

Nibluk did not flinch.

The thing stepped forward. If it could be called a step. It dragged itself from the black, its body stretching, folding, twisting, never settling into one shape. It was like him. But older.

It had been here before the door was shut. Before the deep had become what it was. Before anything had a name. And now, it looked at him.

Nibluk's jagged grin stretched wide.

"What are you?"

The thing tilted its head. It did not answer. Not at first. It just watched. Like the deep had watched him. Like the door had watched him. Like it had been expecting this moment.

And then, finally—

"I am what you will become."

Nibluk's grin faltered. Just for a moment.

The thing smiled back. And the deep shuddered.

Nibluk did not move.

The thing before him shifted, its form never settling, its edges flickering like a shadow cast by a flame that had long since burned out. It had no face, no eyes, no mouth—but it was watching him.

And it was waiting.

"I am what you will become," it had said.

The words were still twisting in his mind, wrapping around his thoughts like hungry roots, taking hold of him before he could decide if he wanted them there.

He flexed his fingers, feeling them stretch longer than before, feeling his skin ripple like it was still learning its new shape.

He had felt this before.

The first time the deep had whispered to him.

The first time the door had marked him.

The first time he had fed on something more than flesh.

But this was different.

This was not the deep speaking to him.

This was something else.

Something that had been waiting for him.

The space around him was not still.

It was pressing in. Testing him. Measuring him.

Not as prey.

Not as a thing to be consumed.

But as something unfinished.

"You think you are whole," the thing murmured.

Its voice did not touch the air. It curled through his veins, settled behind his ribs, dug into his spine like a second consciousness clawing its way inside him.

"You think you have taken the deep into yourself."

Nibluk’s grin was sharp, his black eyes gleaming.

"I know I have."

The thing laughed.

A deep, hollow sound.

A sound that came from all around him.

"No."

The shifting black behind it quivered.

The echoes twitched, pulsed, responded.

"You have only taken the first step."

The space shuddered.

The air thickened.

And then—

It lunged.

Nibluk moved without thinking.

His body reacted before his mind did, twisting away, his new limbs stretching, his muscles pulling in ways they had never pulled before.

The thing was fast.

Too fast.

It crashed into him, its shifting, unstable form folding around him, pressing into his skin, trying to sink inside him.

Nibluk fought back.

His claws slashed, tearing into something that was not flesh but still bled.

The thing laughed.

"Good."

It folded inward, pulling him into itself, into the hollow.

Nibluk felt himself unravel.

His limbs stretched too far, too thin, too broken.

His thoughts twisted.

His hunger grew.

The echoes inside him screamed.

And in that moment, he saw what it was showing him.

Not just itself.

Not just the deep.

But what he would become.

What he was already becoming.

And it was too much.

He ripped himself free.

The thing did not stop him.

It let him go.

It watched him pull away, panting, shaking, his form still flickering, still shifting.

It waited.

"Do you understand now?" it asked.

Nibluk grinned.

"No."

The thing smiled back.

"Good."

Something inside him had changed again.

He did not know what.

He only knew that he was not done yet.

The deep had always whispered to him.

But now, the hollow inside him was whispering back.

Nibluk stood in the shifting dark, his body still, but inside, he was not.

Something inside him moved.

Not hunger. Not instinct. Something new.

He could still feel the echoes, the things he had devoured, pressing against his insides like trapped insects beneath his skin.

The thing before him, the One Who Came Before, watched him with its ever-shifting form. It had shown him what he could become. It had tested him.

And now, it waited.

For him to understand.

For him to speak.

For him to choose.

But Nibluk did not speak.

He grinned.

His jagged, bloodstained teeth gleamed in the dark.

"You think I don't know what I am?" he whispered, his voice low, rasping, filled with something new, something deeper.

The One Who Came Before tilted its shifting head.

"Then tell me."

Nibluk flexed his fingers.

The echoes inside him whispered.

His skin twitched.

For a moment, his own shadow seemed to curl against the floor, stretching further than it should.

"I am Nibluk."

"I am the deep."

"And I am not done yet."

The void shivered.

The One Who Came Before laughed, a hollow sound that came from everywhere and nowhere.

"Then take what is yours."

The echoes inside him clawed at his ribs, slithered beneath his flesh.

Nibluk hissed through his teeth, his black eyes narrowing as something unfamiliar coiled through his veins.

Not hunger. Not instinct. Power. It came slowly at first. A pulse. A breath.

Like the deep itself had slipped into his bones, wrapping around his muscles like a second skin.

He felt it.

The way the air around him seemed to bend when he moved.

The way the shadows at his feet twisted, no longer just responding to light but to him.

His claws curled, and the shadows followed.

He exhaled, and the void itself seemed to listen.

This was not just power.

This was influence.

The deep had given him its whispers.

Now, it had given him its hand.

Nibluk grinned wider.

"More."

The One Who Came Before tilted its head.

"More?"

The void pulsed again.

"Then go take it."

And suddenly—

The world collapsed.

The nothingness around him shattered, folding inward, swallowing him whole.

And when he opened his eyes— He was back in the deep. Stone. Cold air. The weight of the deep pressing down once more. He was home. But he was not the same.

Nibluk crouched low, his black eyes flicking around the cavern he had returned to. He knew this place. These tunnels had once been his only world.

Now, they felt small.

The deep had always made him feel like a crawling thing.

Now, he felt like something else.

Not a thing trapped in the tunnels.

A thing that could shape them.

He stretched his fingers. The shadows around him moved with him, slow and silent, curling at his feet like eager hounds.

This was new. This was right. But it was not enough. He was still hungry. Not just for meat. Not just for death. For more. And he knew where to start.

The Ka'thir had watched him before. They had spoken of the door. They had waited for something to happen. Did they know what he had become? Did they feel it in the stone, in the black, in the pulse of the tunnels themselves?

Nibluk grinned.

"Let's find out."

He slithered forward, deeper into the tunnels, the whispers in his skull quiet for now.

But not gone. Never gone. And soon— Someone would hear them.

Nibluk crawled through the tunnels, his fingers pressing into the cold stone, his black eyes flicking between the shifting shadows. The deep had always been his home, but now, it felt different.

The weight of the rock above him, the silence pressing in the air, the pulsing whispers that had always surrounded him—they were not the same.

They were watching.

The deep knew what had happened.

It could feel what he had become.

And it was waiting to see what he would do next.

Nibluk licked his lips.

"Good."

He moved forward, slithering between narrow tunnels, crawling through gaps too small for any other creature. His limbs stretched with ease, his body folding and twisting in ways it had not before.

He was faster.

He was quieter.

He was something more than he had been.

But he needed to know.

What had the deep given him?

What could he do now?

He needed a test. And he knew exactly where to start.

The Ka'thir had seen him before. They had spoken of the door. They had whispered of the thing behind it. And yet, they had not stopped him. Because they had wanted this.

Or had they?

Nibluk grinned as he slithered through the tunnels toward the Hollow Cavern, where the crawling priests gathered in their endless, silent watch.

Had they thought they understood the deep?

Had they thought they were its chosen?

They were wrong.

And soon, they would see why.

Transformation

The Ka'thir were exactly where he had left them.

Thin, robed figures hunched in the darkness, their bodies unnatural, their heads featureless, wrapped in the old, rotting cloth of their kind. They did not walk.

They crawled.

Their long fingers scraped the stone, their bodies twisting in slow, deliberate movements as they moved without sound.

They were always watching.

But now, so was he.

Nibluk stayed in the shadows at the edge of the cavern, pressing his body against the stone. He could hear them muttering, their strange, rasping words echoing through the deep.

They did not see him.

Not yet.

But something was wrong. Their voices were different. Not reverent. Not calm. They were worried. Afraid.

"The door is open."

"The hollow has moved."

"Something has returned."

Nibluk grinned.

They had felt it. But they did not know it was him. Not yet.

He moved closer. Slow. Silent. And then—

"You have changed."

One of them spoke. Not to another. To him.

Nibluk froze.

The Ka'thir did not turn. Did not move. They simply knew.

The air was heavy now. Not just with the weight of the deep. But with expectation. They had been waiting for him. The grin on his lips stretched wider.

"You were watching?" he rasped.

The Ka'thir moved as one, their heads tilting in perfect unison.

"We always watch."

"Then you know."

The whispers shifted. For the first time, Nibluk saw something new in them. Not patience. Not reverence. Uncertainty. They did not understand what he had become. They had been waiting for something to return from the door. But they had not expected him.

Nibluk stepped forward. Slow. Measured. His limbs did not move the same way they had before. His fingers twitched, and the shadows at his feet moved with them. He felt the deep pulse through him. Something inside him whispered. A hunger, but not for flesh.

For more.

The Ka'thir crawled backward as he approached, their long fingers tensing, their bodies twitching.

"You have touched the hollow."

"You have become something else."

"You are not what we expected."

"You are not what we prepared for."

Nibluk grinned.

"Then you should have prepared better."

The deep responded. The shadows around him rippled. One of the Ka'thir twitched violently, their body spasming, their hands clutching their skull. They made no sound. They simply collapsed. The others shrank away from him.

For the first time— The Ka'thir, the ones who had watched him, the ones who had whispered of the deep before he had ever heard it himself— They feared him. And that made something inside him thrill with pleasure.

"What are you?" one of them rasped.

Nibluk crouched low, his grin wide, his black eyes gleaming.

"I am Nibluk."

"I am the deep."

"And I am still learning what that means."

He flexed his fingers.

The Ka'thir shuddered.

The Ka'thir trembled before him.

They had watched the deep for ages. They had listened to its whispers, had followed its will, had crawled through the tunnels as its servants.

And yet— They had never seen something like this. Like him.

Nibluk crouched low, his fingers pressing into the cold stone, feeling the deep pulse beneath him. The shadows at his feet rippled with his breath, curling around his limbs, responding to him.

The Ka’thir had been wrong about the door. They had thought something would come through it. But the truth was worse. Something had not entered. Something had left.

And now— The deep no longer owned him. He owned it.

One of the Ka’thir moved forward, slow and deliberate, its head tilting in its unnatural way, its cloth-wrapped fingers twitching.

"You have changed," it rasped.

The others muttered, their voices slithering through the air like worms in wet soil.

"He has taken from the hollow."

"He has made it his own."

"He is not bound to the whispers."

"He is something else."

Nibluk grinned, tilting his own head, mocking them.

"And what does that make me?"

Silence.

Then—

"Something that does not belong."

The grin stretched wider.

"Then try to make me leave."

The Ka’thir hesitated.

And in that moment, Nibluk knew the truth.

They were afraid of him.

Not just because of what he had become.

But because they did not understand him.

The deep had always spoken to them.

Now, it spoke to him instead.

And they did not know what that meant.

Nibluk flexed his fingers, feeling the way the shadows twisted at his command.

"You have worshiped the deep for so long," he murmured.

"But you never thought to take from it."

He took a step closer.

The Ka’thir crawled backward.

"That’s the difference between us."

"You listen."

"I consume."

He grinned wider, his black eyes gleaming.

"And I am still hungry."

They did not challenge him. They did not attack. They did not even speak. Because they knew. They had lost their place. The deep was no longer theirs to follow. It was his to shape.

Nibluk stepped forward again, his limbs moving in smooth, unnatural ways, his fingers curling, feeling the weight of power pressing behind his skin.

"You serve the hollow."

The Ka'thir nodded slowly.

"Then serve me."

A long silence. Then— They bowed. Not as men would. Not as creatures of flesh.

They collapsed, their bodies folding, their limbs twitching, pressing their faces into the cold stone. Surrendering.

Nibluk let out a slow, rattling breath. This was how it should be. This was what power was meant to feel like. The deep had always ruled over crawling things. But Nibluk no longer crawled.

Nibluk let out a slow breath, his fingers stretching, feeling the weight of the hollow pulse inside him.

"Let me show you what your whispers have never told you."

The Ka'thir did not move.

And Nibluk reached out.

The Ka'thir had always belonged to the deep.

But Nibluk had taken the deep into himself.

And now, they would belong to him.

He could feel something shifting beneath his skin, could feel the hollow moving, reaching out, twisting through the air like unseen fingers.

The Ka'thir felt it, too.

Their bodies twitched violently, their thin forms jerking, spasming, as if something inside them was breaking free.

Nibluk grinned, watching as their bones cracked, their limbs stretched, their cloth-wrapped heads tilted toward him in silent, agonized obedience.

"Yes," he murmured.

"You will not just serve me."

"You will be remade."

The Ka'thir did not scream. They could not. The deep had never taught them how. But their bodies knew fear. And fear was delicious. Nibluk closed his fingers into a fist.

The hollow obeyed. The Ka'thir broke apart. And when they came back together— They were his. The Ka'thir had once been things that crawled. Now, they were things that obeyed.

Their bodies were not the same. Their limbs had stretched too far, their heads had lost their shapes, their whispers had changed into something else.

They were not just the deep's servants anymore. They were Nibluk's.

His grin was slow, sharp, satisfied.

"Now… let's begin."

Nibluk stood among his newly reshaped Ka'thir, watching them twitch and shudder, adjusting to the changes he had forced upon them.

They were no longer just servants of the deep.

They were his.

Their limbs had stretched further than before, their heads had lost even the faintest impression of a face. Their fingers scraped against the stone, longer now, unnatural, as if the deep had taken its whispers and wrapped them into flesh.

They were still the Ka'thir, but now—

Now, they were something else.

And soon, they would prove themselves.

Nibluk flexed his fingers, feeling the shadows coiling in response. The power the deep had given him was still new, still growing, still waiting to be tested.

And the tunnels were full of things to test it on.

His grin stretched wide.

"Follow me."

The Ka’thir obeyed.

Nibluk slithered through the tunnels, his new followers crawling silently behind him, their long fingers dragging against the cold stone. The tunnels had always been his hunting ground, but now, they felt different.

He was no longer just a thing that lurked.

He was a thing that spread.

He could feel it—his influence moving with him, curling through the deep, pressing into the walls, shifting the air itself.

The Ka’thir felt it too. They did not speak. They did not whisper. But they trembled. Not in fear. In recognition.

The deep had spoken to them before. But now, the deep listened to him. And something in the black, something deeper in the tunnels— Had noticed. The tunnels were never truly empty.

Things lived in them. Things that scuttled and crawled, things that hunted and fed, things that had never seen the surface, never known the light, never feared the gods above.

But now, they would fear him.

Nibluk stopped, crouching low, his black eyes narrowing.

The Ka’thir stopped with him, pressing into the shadows like extensions of his own form.

Something moved ahead.

A beast.

One of the deep’s blind hunters, a massive, hulking thing of muscle and chitin, its body pulsing with unnatural heat, its jaws lined with spines made for rending flesh.

A predator. Once.

Nibluk grinned.

And then— He moved.

The beast sensed him. It reared back, sniffing the air, its massive claws scraping against the stone as it turned toward him. Its eyeless head twitched. It knew something was there. But it did not know what. Not yet.

Nibluk let the shadows coil around his body, twisting, stretching, moving with him. His fingers curled. The shadows responded.

And then, he lunged.

The beast roared, swiping a massive, bone-plated claw through the air.

But it missed. Because Nibluk was already behind it. He had not run. He had not dodged. He had simply been somewhere else.

He grinned, feeling the power moving through him, shifting his body through the black, slipping through the deep the way the whispers had always slipped through his thoughts.

The beast whipped around, its movements slower than his, its bulk betraying it.

It did not understand.

It had always been the predator.

But now, it was the hunted.

Nibluk's dagger flashed, sinking into its thick flesh, tearing deep, but he did not need to strike true.

Not anymore.

The shadows at his feet rushed forward, curling into the wound, spreading through the beast's body like a sickness.

The creature staggered. It could not scream. It could not fight what it did not understand. The darkness inside it pulled. And then, in a single, twisting motion— It collapsed. Dead.

Not by his blade. Not by his claws. By him. By what he had become. By what he could do now. He turned, his black eyes gleaming, looking at the Ka'thir, who trembled in silent awe.

"You understand now?" he whispered.

They bowed. Not just in fear. Not just in worship. In acceptance. He had shown them.

Nibluk crouched low, pressing his fingers into the cooling corpse of the beast. He could feel the power still inside it. Still waiting to be taken. His grin widened.

"We are not done yet."

And then, he fed.

Nibluk crouched over the cooling corpse of the deep-beast, his black eyes flickering as he felt the power still lingering inside it. The deep had shaped this thing, had made it into a hunter, a thing that fed, that survived, that killed.

But it had never been like him.

It had never taken from the hollow.

And now, it would give to him instead.

He ran his clawed fingers through the open wound, feeling the still-warm flesh, the twitching nerves, the fading echoes of life. His touch was not just physical.

The shadows curled, coiling from his limbs, sinking into the wound, drinking.

A low hum rippled through the stone.

The Ka'thir watched in silence, their featureless, cloth-wrapped heads tilted slightly.

They did not speak. They did not move. But they knew. This was not hunger. Not like before. Nibluk was not just devouring flesh. He was taking more.

And as the last remnants of the beast bled into the dark, something inside him shifted. Something deepened. Something woke.

He exhaled slowly, watching as the veins in his arms pulsed with something blacker than blood.

This was new. And he wanted more. He felt different now. His body had always been his own, had always been twisted by time, by hunger, by the deep itself. But now, he could feel it moving inside him.

The thing from the door. The hollow's gift. It had settled in his bones, in his veins, curling like roots digging into old flesh. He flexed his fingers. The air shivered. The deep listened. The Ka'thir trembled.

"What have you become?" one of them rasped, its voice barely more than a whisper.

Nibluk grinned, his black eyes gleaming in the low light.

"Not enough."

He turned from the corpse, stepping into the dark tunnel beyond.

"Come."

"We hunt again."

The Ka'thir followed. Not just as servants. Not just as witnesses. As something new.

They had seen what he could do. They had felt his presence in the deep. And now, they would bring it further.

As Nibluk moved through the tunnels, he could feel them spreading behind him, crawling through the passageways, whispering to the walls.

They were not just watching anymore. They were speaking. Calling others.

Letting the deep know his name. The hollow was no longer just a thing they worshipped. It was a thing that walked. It was him. And it was spreading.

Nibluk licked the black ichor from his fingers and grinned.

"Let them hear us."

The Ka'thir whispered in the dark.

And soon, the deep would answer.

Nibluk moved through the tunnels, his body low, his limbs stretching further than before, his fingers dragging against the stone. He did not rush. He did not stalk like a mindless beast.

No.

Now, he moved like something that owned the dark.

The Ka'thir followed behind him, their long, contorted limbs scraping against the walls, their voices a low, pulsing hum that seemed to vibrate through the stone itself.

Their whispers spread ahead of them, crawling through the tunnels like unseen fingers, brushing against the creatures that lurked in the deep.

Letting them know. The deep was changing. And Nibluk was the reason why. He stopped suddenly, his black eyes narrowing.

Ahead, the tunnel opened into a wider cavern, the walls lined with jagged, broken stone, the air thick with the scent of iron, fungus, and blood.

He knew this place.

A duergar camp.

They had lived here for years, their forges burning hot, their voices loud, their axes dripping with the blood of anything that had stood in their way.

They thought they ruled this part of the deep.

They were wrong.

Nibluk tilted his head, listening.

The Ka'thir waited, crawling into the shadows, their bodies motionless, their presence stretching through the black like waiting hands.

The duergar had not noticed.

Not yet.

They were at their fires, muttering, arguing, sharpening their blades. They were strong. They were killers. They were warriors. But they did not understand the thing that had come for them.

Nibluk's grin widened. And then he moved.

The first duergar never saw him.

One moment, he was sharpening his axe, his thick fingers gripping the handle, his red eyes flickering in the firelight. His mouth curled into a grin at some joke another had told.

Then—

A hand in the dark.

Fingers curling around his throat.

A whisper in his ear.

"Shh."

And he was gone.

Dragged into the shadows.

His strangled gurgle barely left his lips before his throat was opened, the blood spilling in thick, hot streams onto the cavern floor.

The others did not notice. Not yet. And so, Nibluk took another. And another.

The Ka'thir watched. And then, when the first real scream rang out— They moved. The duergar fought.

They screamed in rage, their axes flashing, their voices bellowing commands. They were warriors, their bodies hardened by the dark, by war, by generations of violence.

But this was not a battle.

This was a hunt.

Nibluk moved between them, stepping through the black, slipping out of their sight and back again before they could swing their weapons.

He could feel the deep bending for him now.

The shadows obeying him.

His own limbs stretching, twisting, striking before they even knew where he was.

And the Ka’thir— ,They were not just crawling things anymore. They were his hands. They pulled duergar from the light. They dragged them screaming into the black. They ripped them apart in silence.

And when the last duergar stood, panting, shaking, alone— Nibluk stepped behind him.

The dwarf whirled, raising his axe. Too slow.

Nibluk caught his wrist, twisted. The axe fell to the ground. The duergar snarled, spat, cursed in his broken, throaty tongue.

"What are you?" he choked.

Nibluk grinned.

"The deep."

And then, he fed.

The Ka’thir crawled over the bodies, their whispers soft, rhythmic, as if feeding the stone with the blood that had been spilled.

The deep had always taken the dead.

But now, it would take more.

Not all of the duergar had died.

Some still breathed, their bodies broken, their minds on the edge of knowing what had killed them.

And Nibluk looked at them, his grin slow, sharp, patient.

"Kneel."

The Ka’thir surrounded them, their bodies shifting, their limbs moving too smoothly.

The duergar did not move. But they knew. They had seen what the deep had become. They had heard the whispers. They had felt the black veins curling through the stone. And so— They bowed.

Nibluk exhaled slowly, pleased. He crouched low, tilting his head, watching as the new followers shivered in the dark.

They had fought the deep before. But now— They served it. And soon, others would, too.

The cavern was silent now. The duergar bodies lay in the shadows, their blood soaking into the cold stone, feeding the deep. But not all had died.

Some had survived. Some had knelt. And that meant they belonged to him now.

Nibluk stood among them, watching as the broken warriors stared up at him with hollow eyes, their faces pale with fear, their bodies shaking with something they did not yet understand.

They were killers. Brutes. Slavers. But here, in the deep, in the place where shadows moved when they should not, they were nothing.

They had lost. And now, they would serve.

"You belong to the hollow now," Nibluk rasped, crouching low, his black eyes gleaming, his grin stretched wide.

The duergar did not argue. They had seen too much. They had heard the whispers. And in the deep, those who heard the whispers did not refuse them.

Nibluk stretched his fingers. The shadows at his feet twisted in response.

"Now—let's see how much you're worth."

The Ka'thir crawled forward, their bodies twitching, their elongated fingers scraping against the stone as they whispered to the new followers.

The duergar did not move. They knelt. They listened.

They felt the hollow curling through their bones, pressing into their minds, creeping through the cracks in their thoughts.

It did not force them. It did not need to. They had already broken. And broken things only had one purpose. To be remade. Nibluk watched as the first of them trembled, shuddered, gasped.

Their veins blackened. Their eyes darkened. They had been duergar. But no longer. Now, they were hollow. Now, they were his. Nibluk exhaled slowly, satisfied.

"Good."

The deep was listening. And soon, the tunnels would speak his name. His cult was growing.

The Ka'thir had become his hands. The duergar had become his claws. But he was not done. Not yet. Because there were still minds that did not hear the whisper.

There were still creatures that thought the deep did not belong to him. And the most dangerous of them all— Were the ones who had always lived in the black. The ones who had shaped it, ruled it, built their cities in its depths.

The ones who thought they knew more than the abyss itself. The mind flayers. And they would kneel, too. Nibluk licked the blood from his fingers and turned toward the deeper tunnels.

"Follow me."

The hollow obeyed. And the hunt began again.

Nibluk did not rush.

The deep had always taught him to wait, to listen, to learn.

Before he had become what he was now, he had been a thing that crawled, that stalked, that took only when the moment was right.

And now, even with the power of the hollow inside him, he did not forget that lesson.

The mind flayers were not like the duergar.

They were not simple, greedy things that clung to their forges and their weapons.

They were older. Wiser. Hungrier. They had their own kind of whispers. And that meant he had to be careful. At least, for now. The tunnels deepened. The air grew thicker.

The weight of the deep was different here—not the raw, crushing blackness of endless stone, but something pulsing, breathing, alive.

Nibluk felt it before he saw it. The humming. Not a sound, not a whisper—something inside his mind. A pressure. A weight. A feeling that should not be there. The mind flayers were close.

He crept forward, keeping to the black, the Ka'thir and the hollowed duergar slithering silently behind him.

Then, the tunnels opened. And there it was. The city.

It was not built like the strongholds of the duergar, not carved from stone in crude, brutal shapes.

This place was wrong. The walls moved. Not shifting like shadows—pulsing like flesh. The towers stretched upward, spiraling into the rock above like twisted spines of ancient things long dead.

And the air— The air vibrated. Not with voices. Not with life. With thoughts. Not his own. Nibluk's grin twitched, but he did not move. He was not alone here. Something knew he had come.

He stayed low, pressing his fingers into the cold stone, his black eyes scanning the shifting city below.

The mind flayers did not walk like men or dwarves.

They glided.

Their bodies were smooth, unnatural, wrapped in flowing, alien robes that drifted as if pulled by an unseen tide.

Their heads were featureless save for their mouths, ringed with writhing tentacles, their large, pupil-less eyes void of anything human.

They did not speak. Not with words. Not in a way the others of the deep ever could. But he could feel them talking. Even from here. The pressure in his skull grew, shifting, testing, pushing. A voice—not his own—whispered.

"What is this?"

Not to him. To itself. To others. They had felt something. Something they could not place. The deep belonged to them. And now, something new had come.

Something wrong. Something they did not understand. Nibluk grinned.

"Good."

He shifted back into the black, vanishing into the tunnels before they could find him.

He had seen enough. They were powerful. But they were not ready for him. And when he returned— He would show them why.

Nibluk retreated into the tunnels, his body melting into the shadows, his limbs stretching as he slithered between the cracks of the deep.

He did not rush. The mind flayers had lived in their city for centuries, perhaps longer. They thought they were untouchable. They thought their knowledge made them rulers of the deep. But they had never heard a whisper like his before.

They had always been the ones to push their thoughts into others. But now— Now, someone whispered back. And it would rot them from the inside.

The mind flayers did not dream. They did not see the world as others did. Their minds were shaped for thought, for control, for bending the will of others like soft clay. But now— Something pressed against them. Not words. Not sounds. Something deeper. A feeling they had never known.

Doubt.

It started as a flicker in the minds of the lowest of them, the ones who guarded the city's tunnels, who patrolled the fleshy corridors of their domain.

They felt watched. Not by their kind. Not by lesser creatures. By something else. By something that should not be there.

They turned their eyeless heads toward the walls, their tentacles twitching, their minds reaching out—searching.

But there was nothing.

Nothing but a whisper. A voice that was not a voice.

"You are not alone."

The pressure in their skulls tightened. For the first time in ages, they felt something alien inside their own minds. Not a rival. Not a predator. Something worse. Something that should not be able to reach them.

But it was already inside.

Nibluk did not attack. Not yet. He had chosen one. One that had been weaker than the rest. Not weak in power. Weak in certainty. A mind flayer on the edge of doubt. A mind flayer that had already felt the whispers before it had ever heard him.

He did not take it with claws or teeth. He did not rip it from its home in the dark. He slipped inside.

The whispers crept through the cracks in its thoughts, curling around its mind like black tendrils, tightening, twisting, filling.

It tried to fight. Of course it did. It had spent a lifetime controlling others. It had spent a lifetime being strong.

But this was not something that could be fought. This was not a voice that could be silenced. This was not fear it could dismiss.

This was the deep, crawling into its mind, making a nest inside its thoughts, taking hold of the roots and rotting them from within.

And when it woke, when it staggered through the city, its limbs shaking, its tentacles twitching, its mind no longer fully its own—

The others noticed.

"What is wrong?" they asked, their thoughts pressing into its skull.

But it could not answer. Because it did not know anymore. It only knew the whisper. It only knew the hollow. And soon— It would serve.

One of them was already his. It did not even know it yet. But the others felt it.

The city had changed. The air was heavier now. Their thoughts did not feel safe anymore. And soon— Soon, they would turn on each other.

Nibluk grinned in the dark, watching from above, watching from below, watching from inside.

They had thought they were rulers of the deep. They had thought they understood its whispers. But they had never heard his before. And by the time they realized what had happened, It would already be too late.

The first seed had been planted.

It twisted inside the mind flayer's skull, coiling through its thoughts, warping its instincts, corrupting it from the inside.

It had been strong once. A predator. A thing that had ruled others.

But now— Now, it trembled. Now, it hesitated. Now, it heard his voice more than its own. The others could sense it.

They had seen the way it moved differently, the way its thoughts flickered, the way its tentacles twitched when no words were spoken.

Something was wrong. And that was exactly what Nibluk wanted. He did not strike. Not yet. He waited. He let them doubt. He let them fear. He let them break themselves apart before he even touched them.

The city of the mind flayers had always been a place of silence.

Thoughts moved between them like flowing water, their will shaping their world, their knowledge making them gods of the deep.

But now, the silence was uneasy. Something was different. Something was wrong. They began to turn their thoughts on each other.

"Who has done this?"

"What presence lingers here?"

"Something is watching."

"Something is whispering."

Nibluk could feel their fear now. They were trying to understand what was happening. But they could not. Because they had never been prey before. They had never been hunted. Until now. And still, he did not move.

He only pushed further. The first to fall was the one he had marked. The others had watched it closely. They had questioned it, tested it, sent their thoughts into its mind to search for answers. And they had found something else there.

Something that should not have been. A whisper. A voice that was not its own.

Nibluk.

They did not speak his name. They did not understand it yet. But they felt him. And so, they did what mind flayers had always done to the broken. They cast it out. They turned against their own.

"You are no longer one of us."

The broken one screamed. Not with a voice. With its mind. With the pain of separation. And as it staggered from the city, shaking, lost, afraid in the tunnels it once ruled—

Nibluk was waiting.

He crouched low in the black, his black eyes gleaming, his grin wide.

"You belong to me now."

The mind flayer fell to its knees.

And the hollow took it fully.

The creature twitched, shuddered, twisted. Its form shifted, its body rejecting what it had once been, embracing what it was becoming. It was not just a mind flayer now. It was something more. Something less. Something twisted by the whisper that had slithered into its mind and made a nest.

The first of the mind flayers had fallen. And soon— The rest would follow.

Nibluk exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of the deep press closer, feeling his power grow. The city was already his. The mind flayers just didn’t know it yet. But they would. Oh, they would.

The mind flayer knelt before Nibluk, its body trembling, its breath slow and ragged. It had been cast out, stripped from the comfort of the hive-mind, rejected by the others it once called kin. It had lived its life as a ruler of thoughts, as a master of weaker minds, yet now its own mind was unraveling.

Something had burrowed into it. Something that whispered louder than the collective voice of its people. Something that did not command but corrupted.

It tried to resist.

But there was nothing left to hold onto.

Nibluk crouched in front of the broken creature, his black eyes gleaming, his jagged grin stretching wide. He could see the struggle behind those glowing, pupil-less eyes, the last remnants of its will clawing for escape.

"You know what you are now," Nibluk murmured, his voice curling through the stagnant air like smoke. He reached forward, pressing his fingers against the side of its head.

The flayer shuddered.

"You are nothing."

It gasped, a wet, rasping sound, its tentacles twitching, its body convulsing with the weight of what it had become.

"But I will make you more."

The Ka'thir and the hollowed duergar gathered in the darkness behind him, their twisted bodies shifting, their whispers crawling up the walls like a sickness. They did not watch in curiosity.

They watched in understanding. This was how it always began. A creature thinks itself whole. Then the hollow finds it. Then it breaks. Then it is remade. And when it rises, it no longer belongs to itself. It belongs to Nibluk.

The mind flayer did not speak. It could not. The words, the thoughts it had once wielded as weapons, had been stripped from it, leaving behind only whispers that were not its own.

It followed without question, its long, thin limbs moving too smoothly, its gait wrong, uncertain, obedient.

The others would see it and know.

They would feel the corruption that had taken root in its mind.

They would fear it.

Not because of what it had become—

But because it had not died.

The city would expect the fallen to be devoured. They would expect emptiness where their kin had once been.

But instead, it would return. Twisted. Unchanged in body, but not the same. And that— That would make them question. And questioning would break them faster than any blade.

Nibluk watched the broken thing take its first steps toward the city it once ruled.

The others would not know what to do. They would hesitate. They would search for answers. And in that hesitation— The hollow would take more.

The return was silent. The creature that had been exiled did not crawl back in desperation, did not slink in fear. It walked. The other mind flayers noticed immediately. They felt it.

A mind that had been cut from the collective should not return. Yet here it was. Standing among them. Breathing their air. Thinking where no thoughts should be.

Their heads turned toward it, their minds pressing against its own, trying to read it, to pull from it the knowledge of what had happened.

But something was wrong.

It was empty. Not like death. Not like madness. Something else. Something they did not understand.

And that terrified them.

"What have you become?"

The thought rippled through the gathering, sharp, insistent, demanding an answer.

The corrupted mind flayer did not respond. Not with words. Not with thought. It simply stood. Waiting. Breathing. Present. But not whole.

The others did not know what to do.

Some pressed their thoughts against its own, searching, digging, trying to find what had changed.

And when they touched its mind, They heard the whisper. Not their own. Not their master's. Something else. Something that had already made a home inside their fallen kin. And something that could spread.

Fear slid through the city like a sickness. This was not an attack. Not an invasion. Not something they could strike with their minds and be rid of. This was a corruption. A poison. A thing that had already made its way inside. The hollow had entered their city. And it was still hungry.

Nibluk watched from the black, his fingers curled against the stone, his breath slow, controlled, patient.

They would not act immediately. They would wait. They would question.

And while they hesitated, while they turned on each other in whispers, in doubt, in growing fear— The hollow would spread. One would become two. Two would become four. Four would become a city that had already fallen before they even realized they had lost.

And when Nibluk stepped from the dark, when he revealed himself to them for the first time, when they looked into his black, gleaming eyes and felt the power pressing against their fragile little minds—

They would bow. Or they would break.

The city of the mind flayers had always been a place of order, a place where thoughts moved like currents in the deep, smooth and unbroken. They had ruled for centuries not with steel or fire, but with certainty.

Certainty that their minds were stronger. Certainty that their will was absolute. Certainty that they were beyond corruption. But certainty was a fragile thing. And now, something had fractured it.

Nibluk remained in the tunnels beyond their city, pressing his fingers into the cold stone, feeling the deep pulse with the quiet hum of their thoughts unraveling. He had seen it happen before. He had seen it in the duergar when they had first felt the whisper.

The doubt. The hesitation. The slow, crawling realization that something was already inside. The first of them had already fallen. The others had seen it.

And now, they wondered if they would be next.

That was all Nibluk needed.

The first corruption was always the hardest. The second was always easier.

They had cast out their broken kin, thinking it would die, thinking it would be nothing. They had made themselves believe it was gone.

But it had returned.

And now, it stood among them, silent, unchanged in body, yet utterly wrong.

It did not think the way it had before. It did not answer when they questioned it. It did not fight when they pressed their will upon it. It simply was.

And the others feared it.

They feared what had been done to it. They feared what had touched its mind. They feared what they could not see. That fear made them weak.

And in that weakness, Nibluk slipped into another.

It did not happen with violence.

The second mind flayer was stronger than the first. Its will had not been cracked yet, its certainty not fully rotted away.

But it had felt the change.

It had seen what had been done to its kin.

It had felt the whisper, pressing at the edge of its mind, waiting.

And that was all Nibluk needed.

He did not take it with claws or teeth. He did not drag it into the black, did not tear it apart and leave only an empty husk behind.

He entered.

The whisper curled through the cracks in its mind, burrowing deep, rooting itself where no thought could remove it.

It fought. Of course it did. But it did not win. Because the hollow was already inside. And when it woke, when its body trembled, when its tentacles twitched and its glowing eyes flickered with something too alien for the others to recognize—

The corruption had already taken hold.

The others noticed. The first one had been a mistake, an outlier, an accident that could be discarded. But now— Now there were two. And two was not a mistake. Two was the beginning of something worse.

The city no longer moved as it once had. The air no longer pulsed with thought in perfect unity. There was hesitation now, a slowness in the way they reached out to one another, a carefulness that had never been there before.

They whispered.

"It is spreading."
"There is something inside them."
"This is not natural."

And worst of all—

"Who will be next?"

That was the question that would break them.

Not the attacks. Not the violence. Not even the whispers in the dark. But the thought that the corruption was already here. That it had already chosen its next victim. And none of them knew who it would be.

The two corrupted mind flayers did not speak. They did not think in ways their kin could understand.

But they did not need to. Because they had learned a new way to spread the hollow. They stood among their own. They let the others reach into their thoughts. And when they did— The whisper reached back.

Some resisted. Some pulled away before it could take root. But some lingered too long. And in that moment of hesitation, in that moment of doubt— The hollow entered them, too.

Not fully. Not yet. But enough.

Enough for the voice to stay with them, whispering when they were alone, curling through their dreams, making them question everything they thought they knew.

The deep had always been theirs. But now— Now it belonged to something else. And they did not know how to stop it.

The first killing happened in silence. One of them, paranoid, desperate, lashed out at another, believing the corruption had taken it. It had not. But it did not matter. Because they no longer trusted each other.

And that was all Nibluk needed. They would turn against themselves. They would tear each other apart before they even realized what was happening. And when the time was right—

When the city was at its weakest— Then he would step from the dark. And they would finally see who had been whispering to them all along.

The city was breaking. Not with fire. Not with steel. Not with the screams of war. It was rotting from within.

The mind flayers had ruled these tunnels for centuries, their dominion over thought and flesh unchallenged. They had twisted the minds of others, bending them like soft clay, feeding on their weaknesses.

But now, they were the prey.

And they did not even realize who was hunting them.

Nibluk waited in the darkness beyond their walls, his fingers pressed into the stone, his black eyes gleaming as he felt them crumble.

They turned on each other now, whispering suspicions that had never existed before, questioning thoughts that had once been their foundation. The idea of corruption was foreign to them—before now, they had always been the ones who corrupted.

Now, they feared what they could not see. And fear was a crack in the foundation. A crack that would only grow. The first had been an accident, the second a mistake. The third would be the end of them.

Nibluk did not move through their city. He did not crawl through their streets or slink into their tunnels like a lurking thing.

He did not need to. The whisper was already inside. The corruption had already taken root, feeding on their doubt, digging deeper every time they reached into each other's minds to seek assurance—only to find something wrong.

And that was how the third one fell.

Not through force. Not through violence. It reached out in fear, pressing its thoughts against the others, seeking the comfort of unity, seeking to hear that it was safe.

And in that moment— The hollow whispered back. Not in words. Not in commands. In understanding.

It let the fear settle deeper. It let the doubts sink in, wrapping around the mind like cold fingers.

"You are already lost."

The mind flayer did not resist.

Because it was already broken.

It did not realize the whisper was not its own thoughts.

It did not understand that the fear had never been its own to begin with.

And when it opened its eyes, when it looked upon its kin, when it stood among them and felt them try to read its mind—

It was too late. Another had fallen. The others saw it happen. The first one had been strange, the second an anomaly. But three?

Three was a sickness. Three was a pattern. Three was something they could no longer explain. And so, they turned on each other.

Accusations crept through the city, silent at first, pressing into each other's minds like knives, prodding for weaknesses, for corruption, for whatever had taken hold of their kind.

But every time they reached out— The whisper reached back. The hollow was in too many of them now.

The fear spread like a disease, twisting its fingers into the roots of their minds, making them doubt what was real.

"Is it me?"
"Is it you?"
"Who has been taken?"

They no longer trusted each other. And without trust, without the unity of their thoughts— They were weak. The first killing had been an accident. The second was not. One of them, too paranoid, too afraid to wait for answers, had lashed out.

It had torn into another's mind, seeking to rip the corruption out, seeking to destroy what it did not understand.

But there had been nothing there. The corrupted ones had already learned. They did not act differently. They did not let the hollow be noticed. And so the mind flayers, the rulers of the deep, the masters of thought— Began to slaughter each other.

Nibluk did not stop them. He did not interfere. He simply waited. And smiled.

The city was no longer a fortress of thought.

It was a wound, festering with doubt, bleeding suspicion into the streets, its people tearing themselves apart in silent, mind-breaking panic.

Some had already fallen to him. Others were breaking on their own. And now— Now, they would see him. Now, he would step from the dark. Now, the hollow would claim them all.

He moved forward, his limbs shifting, his grin stretching, his breath slow and even.

His voice crawled from the depths of the city, a whisper that did not come from their own minds, a sound that had been there all along.

"You were never in control."

The deep had always been theirs.

But now— Now it belonged to something else. And it was already inside.

The city was on its last breath.

The mind flayers no longer moved as one, no longer pulsed with the perfect, collective thoughts that had made them rulers of the deep.

Now, their voices were fractured. Their unity was broken.

And the hollow was inside them.

They had spent their existence bending the will of others, controlling minds, shaping thoughts. But now, they had been infected.

Some had already fallen. Some had begun to question. Some had turned against their own.

And as the last remnants of order crumbled, as their thoughts spiraled in doubt and fear, as they sought an answer to what was happening to them—

Nibluk stepped from the dark.

He moved with slow, deliberate steps, his black eyes gleaming with amusement, his jagged grin stretching wide. The shadows curled at his feet, twisting, responding to his presence as if the city itself was already his.

His voice slithered through the air, soft at first, curling through the tunnels, pressing into their fractured thoughts like a knife slipping into flesh.

"You were never in control."

The whisper carried, echoing inside their minds, filling the void that had already taken root in their thoughts.

They turned toward him. Some flinched, recognizing the voice that had been with them for days, weeks, longer than they had even realized. Some stood rigid, frozen, sensing the truth too late.

And some— Some lashed out. Because that was all they had left.

The first mind flayer surged forward, its tentacles writhing, its mind pushing outward, trying to crush him beneath its will.

Nibluk did not move.

He let it reach into him, let it press its thoughts against the abyss that had become his mind.

The creature stiffened.

Its body shuddered.

Its own thoughts came back at it, twisted, warped, no longer its own.

The hollow reached into it, curling through its mind like roots in decayed earth, and the moment it realized what had happened—

It screamed. Not aloud. Inside. The others felt it die. Not in body. But in self. It was still standing. Still breathing. But it was already his.

The next attacker hesitated. But hesitation was not survival. Nibluk's hand twitched, and the shadows moved before the flayer could think. They wrapped around its limbs, curling into its body, forcing it forward onto its knees.

It tried to fight. Tried to push him back. But there was nothing to push against. Because the hollow was already inside it, too. It had been since the moment it had heard his voice. The next one did not attack.

It only stood there, its body trembling, its glowing eyes wide with something it had never known before.

Fear.

Not fear of death. Not fear of pain. Fear that it had already lost. The last of them knelt before he even spoke.

The others—those who still had the strength to think they had a choice—stood motionless, watching, waiting.

Waiting for the words that would decide their fate. Nibluk exhaled, slow and satisfied, watching them with something close to amusement. He had broken cities before. He had made creatures kneel.

But never before had it been this easy. These creatures had thought they were gods. That they could not be touched. But the moment they had doubted themselves, the moment they had felt fear— They had already lost.

Nibluk's grin widened, his voice a whisper that pressed into all of them now, curling through the fractures in their minds, seeping into the cracks that had already formed.

"You have two paths before you."

His fingers twitched, and the shadows tightened around the fallen ones.

"Serve."

The black veins pulsed in their skin, their bodies shivering as the hollow dug deeper.

"Or be consumed."

Silence. Nothing moved. Not even the broken ones. Until, slowly— One of them knelt. Then another. And another. Until the last of them—those who still had their minds, those who had fought until now, those who had been certain of their superiority—

Bent their heads. Nibluk's black eyes gleamed. He had won. But that had never been in question. The only question had been how long it would take them to realize it. He stepped forward, placing a clawed hand on the head of the first one to kneel.

"You were never in control."

His voice was a whisper, but it filled every corner of their dying city.

"But now you will serve something that is."

The Presence

The mind flayers left in silence.

No words. No thoughts shared between them.

They were not an army. They were not conquerors.

They were vessels now, empty husks filled with the whisper that had become their new master.

They moved through the tunnels, slipping into the dark places where lesser things still clung to their lives, carrying his will with them.

They would not attack. Not yet. They would whisper first. They would let the fear spread. They would let the deep realize that something had changed. That something else now ruled here. And when the deep finally understood— It would be too late.

Nibluk stood alone in the hollowed city, his black eyes gleaming, his grin sharp, his fingers twitching against the stone as he felt his influence move outward.

The deep was his now. And soon— All things would belong to him. For the first time in weeks, there was no movement.

No creatures scrambling in the dark. No duergar slavers dragging their chains. No mind flayers lurking in the tunnels, pressing their will onto the weak.

Nibluk had sent them all away. And now, he stood alone. It was a strange thing. He had always been a thing that lurked, a thing that hunted, a thing that followed the whispers of the deep.

But now, the whispers were his own. And for the first time— The deep did not whisper back. The stone was quiet. The tunnels were waiting. And something about that silence did not feel right.

Nibluk licked his lips, his fingers tapping absently against the rock beneath him. Something had shifted. Something was watching. Something had noticed. The grin on his lips widened.

"Good."

The first sign came as a tremor beneath his feet. Not a cave-in. Not shifting stone. Something deeper. Something ancient. Something older than the deep itself.

The tunnels had always been his world, the darkness his home, his hunting ground, his kingdom. But now, he felt something else moving through it. Something that had been here long before him. Something that had been waiting.

It did not whisper. It did not crawl through the edges of thought like the hollow did. It was not afraid of him. And that was new.

Because everything that had come before had feared him. Everything had broken before him. But this— This did not fear. This hated.

He did not hear a voice. He did not feel a presence in his mind. But the shadows at his feet did not move the way they should. The stone around him did not belong to him anymore. Something was pressing back.

Not speaking. Not revealing itself. Just waiting. Measuring. Testing. As if to say—

"You have taken too much."

"You are not welcome here."

Nibluk's fingers twitched. His grin did not falter, but he felt the weight in the air now. The deep had always been his. But it was not his alone. Something else had been here first. Something that did not whisper. Something that did not fear. And now— It had finally noticed him.

Nibluk had never feared the deep.

He had been born in its blackness, shaped by its silence, made strong by its endless hunger.

But now, for the first time, he felt something else moving in it.

Something older than the hollow. Something that did not whisper. Something that had been waiting. It had not attacked him. Not yet. But it had made itself known. And that meant it was watching. And if it was watching, that meant it was waiting for him to make a mistake.

Nibluk grinned, his jagged teeth flashing in the dark.

"Then we'll see who waits longer."

He did not move.

He did not go searching through the tunnels like a desperate thing.

That was what it wanted.

Instead, he stayed in the city, alone in the ruins of the place he had conquered, and let the hollow settle deeper into him.

He had spread his power. He had sent his mind flayers crawling through the tunnels, planting whispers like seeds in the black earth.

But here—

Here, he waited. Because patience was the most dangerous weapon of all. He did not lash out. He did not provoke. He let the ancient thing wonder.

"Does it know I have seen it?"
"Does it know I am watching?"
"Does it know what I am?"

And when it finally made its move, He would be ready. The power inside him was not finished growing. He could feel it still shifting, stretching, waiting to be understood.

The hollow had never been a gift of raw strength. It was not a weapon that could be swung like an axe. It was a disease. A whisper. A creeping thing. It did not break walls. It rotted them from the inside.

And now, Nibluk fed it.

He sat in the blackness of his throne, pressing his fingers to the stone beneath him, feeling the veins of the hollow twisting through the rock, spreading further into the deep.

The tunnels were not just stone anymore.

They were part of him.

And soon, he would see if this ancient thing could stand against something that had already made a home in its bones.

It moved in the edges of his perception.

Not in whispers. Not in words.

In absence.

The hollow had touched so much now—spread so far, burrowed into so many minds, soaked into the tunnels like black water seeping into dry earth.

But there were places it could not go. Places where the shadows did not move. Where the whispers did not take root. Something was pushing against him. Something was rejecting him.

It was not fighting back with claws or fire. It was simply refusing to be taken. And that was the most dangerous thing of all. Because it meant it did not fear him. It meant it had faced things like him before. And it had survived.

Nibluk stood at the edge of his city, his black eyes narrowing as he looked into the tunnels that had once belonged to him.

But now— Now, they were not empty. Something had touched them. Something had erased his whispers there. Something had reclaimed them. And that meant something had challenged him.

His grin widened. Good.

He had waited long enough. He took his first step forward, his fingers twitching, feeling the hollow coil through his skin, ready to be used.

"Let’s see what’s waiting for me."

And the deep shuddered at his approach.

Nibluk moved carefully, his body low to the stone, his fingers pressing into the cold rock as he felt the weight of the deep shift around him.

These tunnels had once belonged to him. Everything had belonged to him. But now— Now, there were places where the hollow did not spread.

It was unnatural. Not because they were empty, not because they were abandoned, but because they were untouched.

His power seeped into everything, burrowing into the cracks of the deep, whispering into every shadow. But here—

Here, the whispers did not take root. Something was pushing back. Something was denying him. And that was something he had never faced before.

He did not rush. The deep had always taught him to wait, to watch, to learn. His black eyes flickered as he crept along the edge of this new place, watching, feeling. His fingers ran along the stone, tracing its surface, testing if the hollow could take it.

The shadows did not move. The whisper did not spread. The stone beneath his fingers felt old —not just with time, but with something else. Something stronger than time. Something that had been here long before the hollow.

His grin twitched.

That meant it had been waiting. The tunnels were too quiet. Not in the way of the dead. Not in the way of abandoned places. But in the way of something that was listening.

Nibluk exhaled slowly, his breath curling in the still air.He could not hear it. He could not see it. But he could feel it. A presence that was not a whisper, not a thought, not a thing of the hollow.

It did not creep. It did not slither. It simply was. And it was watching him.Waiting to see what he would do.

Nibluk’s grin widened.

"Enough waiting."

His fingers twitched, and the hollow rippled outward, curling into the blackness, twisting through the air.

But it did not spread. The deep rejected him. The hollow found no purchase. The thing that had been waiting pushed back.Not with whispers. Not with thoughts. With presence. With the weight of something that had been here first.

A force that did not need to consume because it was already whole.

Nibluk’s black eyes narrowed, his jagged grin flashing in the dark.

"I see you."

He let his voice curl through the tunnels, let it press outward, reaching into the blackness like a hand grasping for something unseen.

"I feel you."

The deep did not respond. The presence did not move. But it understood. And that was enough.

Nibluk exhaled, his grin twisting wider, his blackened claws scraping against the stone.

"You have been waiting."

"You have been watching."

"Now speak."

His voice echoed through the tunnels, pressing into the silence of the thing that would not be touched.

"What are you?"

"What dares push against me?"

And for the first time— Something spoke back. The tunnels did not shake. The air did not stir.The deep did not tremble.

But Nibluk felt it.

The weight of something older than him, something that had been waiting long before he had ever crawled from the dark.

It did not whisper like the hollow. It did not push against his mind. It simply was. And then, it spoke. It was not a voice made of sound. It was a presence, a feeling that filled the space around him, pressing against his flesh like something that had always been there.

"You are nothing."

The words did not crawl into his mind the way a mind flayer's thoughts did. They did not twist like the hollow's whispers.

They tore.

Nibluk's grin did not falter, but he felt the weight of them, the sheer force of what had just recognized him.

This was not something that had been watching in fear.

This was something that had been waiting in disgust.

"A wretched thing."

"A hollow vessel."

"A crawling mistake."

The words scraped across him like stone grinding against bone.

Not because they were true. But because they had been spoken before. To something else. To something that had come before him. And that meant— This was not the first time the hollow had tried to spread. This was not the first time the deep had been corrupted. And this thing had been here to stop it before.

Nibluk's black eyes gleamed. His grin widened.

"I am nothingss?"

His voice slithered through the air, wrapping around the presence like a creeping thing testing the edges of a cage.

"Then why are you speaking to me?"

The presence did not recoil.It did not react. It did not try to crush him, consume him, break him. Because it did not need to. It simply stood. It was not like the others he had broken before. It did not whisper. It did not hunger. It did not want. It simply existed.

And that was why it was dangerous. Because it had nothing to lose.

And Nibluk— Nibluk had everything to take. The deep had always belonged to him. But now, he had to ask himself— Had it ever truly belonged to the hollow?

Or had this thing been here first? Waiting. Watching. Stopping things like him before they could spread.

Nibluk exhaled, his fingers twitching, his grin stretching, his breath curling in the dead air.

"You don't like what I've become."

No response. Because it did not need to speak hate. It simply was hate.

"You don't like what I'm making of this place."

Nothing. But the air felt heavier. More solid. More real. And for the first time, Nibluk wondered— Was the hollow truly the most dangerous thing in the deep? Or had it been kept at bay all this time by something even worse?

And now— Now that it had finally noticed him— Would it let him continue to exist?

Nibluk did not retreat in fear. Fear was for lesser things. But he was not a fool.

This presence—it did not react like anything he had faced before. It did not writhe in the hollow's grasp, did not resist as though fighting off a sickness.

It simply stood. Unmoved. Unchanging. Unbroken. And that was something new. Something that should not be possible.

His fingers twitched, the hollow inside him pressing outward, testing the edges of this thing, feeling for weakness, searching for something to rot, to twist, to take.

But there was nothing to take. No mind to erode. No whispers to replace. Nothing that could be changed. And that was the most dangerous thing of all. Because it meant the hollow had never touched it. Not now. Not ever.

It was something outside the cycle of corruption. And that meant it did not belong to him. Yet. Nibluk licked his lips, his jagged grin stretching.

"Let's see if you can break."

The hollow had always spread. The Ka'thir. The duergar. The mind flayers. It did not matter what they had been before. The moment they had heard the whisper, they had already lost.

But this thing had heard it. And it had not fallen.

Nibluk pushed.

The darkness around him writhed, shifted, crept forward, curling toward the presence like roots seeking purchase in dead earth.

The hollow pressed into it. But it did not sink in. It did not take hold. It did not spread. The air around the presence remained the same. As if the hollow was not even real to it. As if Nibluk himself was not even real.

His black eyes narrowed. He pressed harder. The whisper grew, slithering deeper, trying to find cracks, gaps, anything it could slip into. And for the first time since he had been given the hollow— Since he had become the hollow— He felt nothing.

The presence did not resist. It did not push him away. It simply refused him. The hollow had failed. And that— That was impossible.

His grin twitched, but it did not fade.

His fingers curled against the stone, his black eyes gleaming, his mind racing. This had never happened before. Everything could be corrupted. Everything could be taken. It was not a question of if, only when.

But this thing had been here longer than the hollow. It had been here before him, before the whispers, before the deep had been his. And if it had never been touched before now— Maybe it never could be. Maybe that was why it had waited.

Not because it feared him. But because it knew he would try. And it had wanted him to fail. Because failure meant one thing. He was not the most powerful thing in the deep. And he never had been.

The presence did not move. It did not strike. It did not attack. It simply stood.

Unchanging. Unyielding. As if to say—

"Are you finished?"

"Have you learned?"

"Do you understand what you are now?"

And for the first time— Nibluk did not have an answer. He had thought himself the apex, the harbinger, the thing that lurked in the dark and made the deep his own.

But now he had seen something older. Something that did not need to take. Because it had never been weak enough to be taken. And that meant— He had been allowed to grow. Allowed to spread. Allowed to take his little kingdom, because it had never mattered.

Until now. Until he had touched something that should not be touched. And now— Now, it was finally looking at him. Not as prey. Not as a threat. But as a mistake that had gone too far.

Nibluk exhaled, his grin stretching, even as something in him began to coil tight. The hollow had never failed him before. But now, it had. And that meant he had to change the way he played this game.

Nibluk did not run. Running was for things that feared death. He had never feared it before. But for the first time, he felt something close to it. Not fear of dying. Fear of not knowing.

This thing—this presence—was beyond his understanding. It was beyond the hollow, beyond the deep, beyond everything that had ever whispered to him.

And he did not like that.

His fingers twitched, his black eyes narrowing as he took a slow step back.

The presence did not move. Did not chase. Did not advance. Because it did not need to. It was waiting. Not because it feared him. But because it was letting him comprehend his own insignificance.

And that was worse than any attack. Nibluk exhaled, his jagged grin twitching, his claws scraping against the stone.

"I do not know what you are."

The deep remained silent. No answer. No reaction. Nothing. And that, more than anything, made him want to break it.

Nibluk was not a fool. The hollow had failed him here. That meant this was not just another thing to be devoured. It was something outside of the cycle of taking and being taken. And if it could not be corrupted— It had to be understood.

He crouched low, pressing his hand against the cold stone, letting his voice slither forward, wrapping through the tunnels, curling into the stillness like a snake testing the air.

"You push against me."

"But you do not move."

"You deny me, but you do not stop me."

His grin stretched wider.

"That means you want something."

He did not know if it was true.

But if he was going to play this game, he had to make the rules.

Still, the presence did not answer.

Did it understand speech?

Did it think in words?

Or was it something even the mind flayers would have failed to comprehend?

His grin twitched.

"You know what I am."

"But I do not know what you are."

"So tell me—"

"What name does the deep give you?"

For the first time— Something shifted. Not a movement. Not a sound. But a weight. Like something had been settled. Like something had been decided. And then— The answer came. Not in words. Not in whispers. But in rejection.

The air tightened, the stone hardened, the deep itself pressed against him, crushing, closing, suffocating. Not like the hollow. Not like whispers. This was not a voice in the dark. This was the dark itself. Not something that lurked. Not something that watched. Something that had been here before things like him had ever crawled into the tunnels. Something that did not speak. Because it did not need to. Something that did not corrupt. Because it was already pure.

And as Nibluk felt it move for the first time, as he felt the deep itself twist in his presence—

He realized something he had never considered before. The deep had never belonged to him. It had only allowed him to exist.

And now— It had finally decided that he should not.

His grin did not fade. If anything, it stretched wider, jagged and gleaming in the dark.

"There you are."

His fingers curled against the stone, feeling the way it fought back against him now.

Not resisting. Not pushing. Just refusing to be shaped. That was power. That was something worth taking. If it could not be corrupted, if it could not be turned, then it had to be broken. And Nibluk had broken many things before.

His breath curled into the cold air, his claws scraping against the stone, his black eyes gleaming with something like hunger.

"You do not like what I have become."

"You do not like what I have done."

"But you have waited."

He exhaled slowly, his voice dropping into a whisper.

"That means you are afraid of what comes next."

He let the words sink in. Let them fester. Let them press against something that had never been spoken to this way before. If it would not answer— Then he would force it to move.

His fingers twitched. The hollow lashed outward, not to corrupt—but to pull. To drag this thing into the black and make it reveal itself.

And for the first time— For the first time since he had stepped into this cursed place— The presence reacted. The deep shuddered. The stone cracked. And the darkness split open. Something was coming. And this time— It was coming for him.

The deep did not break. The deep did not crack. The deep simply shifted, and for the first time since he had become the hollow, Nibluk felt what it meant to be small. It did not reveal itself as a form, a beast, or a god. It did not take the shape of something he could understand. Because it did not need to. It simply was.

And as the darkness around him hardened, as the air thickened, as the deep turned against him— He felt it. A force that had always been here. Not waiting. Not hunting. Simply watching. Because it had seen things like him before.

Things that whispered.
Things that spread.
Things that thought themselves masters of the deep.

And it had removed them. Not with hunger. Not with war. But with absolute rejection. And now, it had decided to reject him, too.

Nibluk's grin did not falter.

Even as the shadows at his feet stopped obeying him. Even as the hollow seized inside his veins, trembling against something it could not grasp. Even as the force pressed down on him, harder, heavier, unyielding. Because he had never bowed before. And he would not bow now.

His fingers curled, the hollow bursting from his body, stretching outward, clawing against the weight that had come to unmake him.

It was not fear. It was not pain. It was defiance. He had taken everything before. And he would take this, too. The deep had been silent too long. And now, it would speak his name.

"You waited too long to stop me."

His voice slithered through the black, his body twisting against the unseen force, fighting, pushing, trying to consume.

"You should have crushed me before I spread."

"Now, I am the deep."

"And I will not be removed."

The weight tightened. And the deep answered. Not with words. Not with thought. With absolute, undeniable truth.

Nibluk was nothing.

The force twisted. Not his body. Not his limbs. Him. The hollow screamed inside him. Not in rage. Not in hunger. But in panic.

Because it knew. This was not a thing to be fed upon. Not a thing to be taken. This was something that had been here before it.

Before the whispers.
Before the corruption.
Before things like Nibluk had ever crawled from the dark.

And it was not afraid. The weight crushed him. Not his body. His existence.

The hollow lashed out, fighting against the unseen force, trying to slither into it, trying to take root, trying to spread.

But there was nothing to take. Nothing to rot. Nothing to claim. Because the deep was whole. And for the first time, Nibluk felt what it was like to be a thing that should not be. His black eyes widened. His grin twitched. And for the first time— For the first time since he had taken the hollow into himself— He shook. He felt fear.

And the deep pressed harder. Not killing him. Not yet. Because it wanted him to understand.

"You are not the master."

"You are not the hunter."

"You are a pawn."

"And now, I have decided your time is over."

The hollow screamed. And for the first time— Nibluk ran.

It was not cowardice. It was not weakness. It was survival. Because this was not his fight. It had never been his fight. The force had not come for him. It had come for the thing inside him. And that thing— That thing was afraid.

The hollow twisted, recoiled, collapsed into itself, slithering deeper into Nibluk's body, no longer trying to spread, no longer trying to take.

Only trying to flee. Because it knew. It remembered. This was not the first time it had tried to infect the deep. This was not the first time it had tried to consume.

And the last time— It had been buried. Not destroyed. Not erased. Buried. And now, the deep had decided it was time to bury it again.

Nibluk's breath came in ragged gasps as he staggered through the tunnels, the weight of the force still pressing against him, pushing, erasing, rejecting.

His limbs shook. His mind burned. The hollow was clawing at him, dragging him deeper into the dark, forcing him to keep moving. Because if he stopped— If he let the deep catch him— It would not just remove the hollow. It would remove him.

Like he had never existed at all. And for the first time— Nibluk realized he was not the harbinger. He was not the apex. He was just a vessel. And the force had never cared about him at all. It had only come for the thing that had used him.

And now, he had to decide. Would he keep running? Or would he turn against the hollow before it consumed him completely?

Because one thing was certain— If he did nothing, the deep would erase him. And it would be like he was never anything at all.

Nibluk staggered through the tunnels, his limbs trembling, his breath ragged.

He could still feel it inside him—the hollow writhing, clawing, not at the deep anymore—but at him.

It was trying to stay inside. Trying to bury itself deeper. Trying to make him run. But he was done running. For the first time, Nibluk knew the truth. He had never been the master. He had never been in control.

The hollow had used him, let him believe he was spreading his power, taking his kingdom. But he had only ever been a vessel. And now, it was going to drag him down with it. Unless he could tear it out first.

His claws scraped against the stone as he collapsed to one knee, his black eyes flashing with pain, with rage, with something that wasn't quite fear—but close enough.

The force was still behind him. Unmoving. Unshaken. Waiting. Because it knew he could not escape.

"Listen!" he snarled, his voice cutting through the tunnels, curling through the crushing weight of the deep.

"You don't want me."

"You never wanted me."

"You want it."

Silence. Not because it was thinking. Not because it was considering his words. Because it already knew them. It had always known.

The hollow reacted before the deep did.

It surged inside him, tightening around his bones, pressing into his skull, curling through his veins like a living parasite.

"You cannot fight me."

It was not a whisper. It was not a thought. It was a command. It had never spoken to him this way before. Because it had never needed to. It had always guided him gently, let him believe it was his own thoughts, his own hunger, his own whispers.

But now, it dropped the illusion.

"You are nothing without me."

"You are weak."

"You will die if you let me go."

His grin twitched, his teeth clenched, his vision blackening at the edges as the hollow dug into him deeper, trying to anchor itself, trying to stay.

He felt his body twisting, the hollow trying to take more of him, trying to keep what it had already claimed.

And for the first time—

Nibluk fought back.

He clawed at his own skin, his own chest, his own throat, tearing at the places where the hollow had rooted itself, digging his nails into his own flesh as if he could physically rip it out.

"No."

His voice was ragged, shaking.

"You do not own me."

He could feel it writhing in panic now, trying to force him to move, trying to drag him away from the presence behind him.

But it was too late. He had already made his choice. And the deep had been waiting. The presence did not speak. It did not hesitate. It acted.

And Nibluk felt everything unravel. The force tore into him, pressing through his skin, through his veins, through the place where the hollow had made its nest.

The hollow screamed. Not aloud. Not in thought. But inside him. Like a thing being dragged from its home, from its feeding ground, from the only place it had ever existed.

It clawed at him, twisting his body, raking through his bones, tearing at him as it was being torn away.

And Nibluk— Nibluk had never felt pain like this before. The hollow was not just power. It was part of him now. And as it was ripped away, it took pieces of him with it. His body seized, his limbs jerked, his vision flashed with black and red and sickly, twisting light.

It was dying. And it was taking him with it. But the deep did not let that happen. Because Nibluk was not the thing it had come to destroy. The hollow was.

So the force did something he had never felt before. It did not take. It did not corrupt. It undid. The hollow was being erased. Not consumed. Not twisted. Not reshaped. Just— unmade. And Nibluk felt every second of it.

His body convulsed, cracked, burned, his screams echoing through the tunnels, his hands clawing at nothing, his throat raw, his mind splintering beneath the weight of what was happening.

He had always been the one doing the breaking. Now, for the first time— He was the one being broken. And then— Then it was gone.

Nibluk collapsed.

His body hit the cold stone, twitching, shaking, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

He was empty. Not weak. Not dead. But empty. The presence had taken nothing from him. But it had removed everything the hollow had given him. And now, he was just Nibluk again.

A creature that crawled in the dark. A thing of flesh. A thing that should have never been more than that.

And the deep— The deep had decided he would never be more again.

He did not know how long he lay there. Minutes. Hours. Long enough for the weight of the deep to finally fade. Not in fear. Not in retreat. But because it was done.

The hollow had been erased. And he was no longer worth its attention.

Nibluk exhaled slowly, his grin twitching— Not in amusement. Not in hunger. In something else. Something he had never felt before. Relief.

Nibluk wandered.

Not as a master.
Not as a harbinger.
Not as a thing that whispered into the minds of others.

Just as what he had always been.

A creature of the dark.

His fingers dragged along the cold stone, feeling the rough surface beneath his touch, feeling the deep as it had always been.

Silent.
Endless.
Uncaring.

He sniffed the air, his black eyes flickering as he listened to the sounds he had once ignored.

The faint drip of water from somewhere unseen.
The distant scurrying of unseen things.
The hollow echoes of tunnels that stretched on forever.

He crouched low, pressing his fingers into the damp earth, drinking from a puddle as he always had.

No ichor.
No black veins twisting in his skin.
Just cool water.

Just him.

A rat skittered nearby.

Nibluk moved without thought, without hesitation.

His limbs twisted, his body coiling, his fingers darting out with practiced precision.

He caught it.

The creature wriggled, its tiny claws scratching at his hand, its panicked squeaks echoing softly through the tunnels.

He gnawed into it.

The warm blood filled his mouth, the raw meat tearing between his teeth.

And for the first time in what felt like forever—

He did not hunger for more.

He did not crave something greater.

He just ate.

And it was enough.

He licked his fingers, his jagged grin twitching as he exhaled, his breath curling in the cold, damp air.

There was no more power to claim.

No more whispers.

No more weight pressing against his mind.

Just him.

Just the deep.

Just what he had always been.

And for the first time, he felt free.

He moved again, his body low to the stone, creeping, slinking, listening.

No longer hunting for worshipers.
No longer searching for things to break.
No longer whispering into the minds of others.

Just crawling.

Just watching.

Just existing.

A tunnel loomed ahead, its entrance wide, jagged, endless.

Nibluk paused, glancing over his shoulder once, his black eyes flickering in the dim glow of some distant fungus.

There was nothing left behind him.

Nothing waiting for him.

Nothing calling to him.

Just the deep.

Just his home.

He disappeared into the black, his body vanishing into the tunnels that had always been his.